

Gunnar Heald Singer

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Farmham



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THE PILGRIMAGE OF PREMNÁTH

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SWAY OF PHILIPPA

THE EVESHAMS

THE YOUNG GERANDE

BRAY OF BUCKHOLT

BIJLI THE DANCER

THE HEART OF HINDUSTÁN

THE PATH

Leopold Glaze

THE PILGRIMAGE OF PREMNÁTH

BY
EDMUND WHITE

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic main . . .
. . . the Discerning Intellect of Man,
When wedded to this Goodly Universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.

WORDSWORTH.

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AN APPRECIATION OF EDMUND WHITE

BY SIR T. W. HOLDERNESS, G.C.B., K.C.B., K.C.S.I., I.C.S.

EDMUND WHITE, as may be readily divined from the Indian themes of his works and from the remarkable acquaintance which they show with the life and thought of the Indian people and the mechanism of Indian administration, passed the active part of his life in India and in the service of the Indian Government. He belonged to the Indian Civil Service, passing into it at the open competitive examination of 1865 and retiring from it in 1892. The earlier part of his education was received at a German University, and though he proceeded subsequently to the University of Edinburgh, and though he was throughout his life as stout-hearted and patriotic a Briton as could well be imagined, he retained to the end the impress of German philosophy and German thoroughness of method. In his early days in India he was a keen student of Kant and his successors, and a great admirer of Goethe and Schiller. Latterly he became a devoted Wordsworthian. On one occasion he told me that for a long time past he had read Wordsworth from cover to cover at least once a year. A pocket Wordsworth was his inseparable travelling companion.

Arriving in India in 1867, after the two years' period of probation and special training which at that time the young Indian civilian underwent at home, White was allotted to what is now the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. His first district was Bareilly, the head-quarters of the administrative division of Rohilkhand. Pilibhit, now a separate district, was

then an important sub-divisional charge of the district of Bareilly, and there, after due initiation into official business at district head-quarters, and after passing the usual examinations in the vernacular language and in law, White was sent as sub-divisional officer. It was a lonely place, where the young European magistrate was thrown very much on his own resources. A bluffer independence of character and habit of swift decision and command, an increasing inclination for solitude, reflection and books, were the result. There he learnt to know and like the people over whom he was placed, and there he acquired that intimate and minute knowledge of Indian life in its domestic and tender aspects which appears on every page of his Indian stories, and particularly perhaps of the present book. In course of time he was transferred from Pilibhit to the neighbouring district of Bijnor, also a lonely and isolated place, but possessing the attractions of a long and beautiful cold weather season, noble forests and streams, and abundance of tigers and other big game.

He remained there until he took his first leave to Europe after nearly ten years' residence in India. The whole of that time he had spent in two districts of one division of the province in daily and hourly contact with the native population, without any of the social distractions that are found in the larger stations of Upper India. At the present day, when young civilians are bandied about from district to district at intervals of a few months or weeks, or are snatched up for secretarial work at the head-quarters of the Local Government, a record of this kind would be unique. In White's case the importance of the circumstance lies in this, that the Indian people and Indian life and thought became to him an open book, so far as that is possible for a European. The fidelity of his portraiture, whether he is narrating the intricacies of a religious feud between Mohammedans and Hindus or the incidents of a love intrigue which shatters the domestic peace

of an Indian home, or describing the wiles of the pettifogging lawyer and the astute money-lender or the tyranny of the big landlord, or expounding the mysteries of Hindu philosophy or the ideals of neo-Mohammedanism, is unmistakable. He may lack the magic of Kipling's pen, the vivacity and technique of other distinguished novelists who have taken India for their theme; but he is always on the sure ground of fact.

The rest of Edmund White's official career is of no special importance in relation to his writings. Shortly after his return from furlough he passed for good from district life to the higher administration. After conducting the operations of the decennial census of the province in a highly creditable way he became Director of Public Instruction under the Local Government. The post was exactly suited to his literary tastes, his power of organization and his love of system. He held it with great success until 1892, when he decided, on account of his wife's health, to retire from the public service. In a valedictory notice the Local Government spoke in terms of praise of his "administration characterized by the union of thoroughness and vigour with temperate and conciliatory control."

Edmund White's books are the product of the years of retirement. An Indian civilian has usually a good deal of work left in him at the age of fifty, and White was exceptionally vigorous both in body and mind. He took an active part in the local affairs of the borough of Lewes, where he made his home. But the studious bent of his mind reasserted itself, and he chose the novel as the most agreeable way of recording his observations of life and character and his reflections upon them, and giving play to his philosophy of life. Eight works in all, including the one now presented to the public, were leisurely and conscientiously produced. Four of them dealt with phases of English life, and these are noteworthy for the

talent displayed in the delineation of character, for careful study of motives and acute psychological analysis. They enjoyed the good word of reviewers and a certain *succès d'estime*; but they were scarcely of a kind to achieve swift and wide popularity with the novel-reading public. None the less, they deserve greater attention than they have so far received.

The Indian stories are of a different order. Their merits are more conspicuous, their substance is stronger, and they belong to a *genre* of fiction in which the competitors are very few. The Anglo-Indian novel in which the chief element is European, and native life, if not ignored, figures only as a feeble accessory and indefinite background, is common enough. But the genuine Indian romance, novel or tale, call it what we will, in which the characters and the plot are wholly Indian, and which turns on incidents of native life undisturbed by contact with the European, is rare. The reason is not far to seek. The field is one in which it is difficult to succeed, and easy to fail. Knowledge, sympathy, insight and imagination in no small degree are required. It is not enough to know India and its inhabitants in their external aspects, to be able to describe the special features of its landscapes or the garb and habits of the people. There must be insight into the life of the family and the home. There must be sympathy with much that is unfamiliar and that jars with Western traditions and conventions. And there must be imagination to enter into the universe of ideas in which mankind of the East dwells and to realize the motives and passions by which it is swayed. For the mind of the East is not that of the West. It is more primitive, in closer touch with the natural world, with the physical facts of life and death, birth and decay. It plays with ideas and uses language almost biblical in directness and follows a logic of its own. To interpret the soul of the East in terms of the West is thus a

hard task, and demands high qualifications. And the most skilled interpreter will, after he has tried his best, still be haunted by doubt whether he has divined aright and grasped the reality behind the veil of sense.

The intrinsic difficulty of the European author who would reveal the inner India to Western eyes is increased in works such as *Bijli the Dancer*, *The Path*, and *The Pilgrimage of Premnáth*, by the divergence of the central motive of the plot and the dominant characters from the trivial and commonplace. The dancer is not the ordinary singing girl of the *Arabian Nights*; the Mohammedan student in *The Path* who returns to the parental home after long wanderings in Western lands preaches strange doctrines to his fellow religionists; the Hindu banker Premnáth in the present romance is a mystic after the pattern of a mediæval quietist. Characters such as these certainly cannot be common in India. They are anything but typical; but has the author made them conceivable, persuasive, real? Is the ideal world in which they move sufficiently like the Indian world of fact to allow us to accept them? Readers of the books must judge for themselves. The late Sir Alfred Lyall, no mean authority on Indian matters or on letters, thought very highly of *Bijli the Dancer*. There are others who know their East who unreservedly accept the incidents and the personages of these tales as ideally true.

The *motif* of the novel just named is not unfamiliar to writers of fiction, but the atmosphere is strange and the setting Oriental. A famous singer and dancer, whose art is her life and whose skill and charms hold audiences spellbound, contracts a fugitive alliance with a Pathan nobleman. It is no vulgar amour, but a high and serious passion. The great man wishes to make her his wife under Mohammedan law, in order to withdraw her from the public gaze and place her in permanent bonds of domesticity. But this means the renun-

ciation of her art and the triumphs of the song and the dance. The conflict between the woman and the artist is skilfully wrought out in a series of incidents and dialogues. The vacuity of life behind the *purdah*, and the vexation of spirit which it produces in a being like the dancer accustomed to free existence and the practice of her art, force a decision. The circumstances of the flight, the storm which stays the fugitives on the river bank, and the parting scene are admirably described and are full of local colour and romance. Granted that the dancer makes somewhat strong demands on the imagination, the story as a whole is a wonderfully faithful and graphic picture of Indian life as it glides along, for the most part peacefully, but ever and anon punctuated by tragedy and evil-doing, in the pleasant country-side of Upper India.

The canvas of *The Path* is larger and the design more ambitious. The scene is again found in the prosperous market town of Ronáhi, the local ruler of which, Shekh Rafat Ali, officially known as the Tahsildar, is one of the best minor characters in these Rohilkhand romances. He is clearly drawn from the life. Edmund White had a great admiration for the capable and loyal Mohammedan officials of Upper India. They were the backbone, he held, of the administration. They were wise and tolerant and purposeful, trusted by their co-religionists, respected by and on excellent terms with their Hindu neighbours. The breed, it is devoutly to be hoped, still survives, notwithstanding competitive examinations and the decay of patronage. The plot of *The Path* is simple. The second son of a decayed Sayyid house, after years passed in Arabia and in Europe in quest of truth, returns to his Ronáhi home to announce a new gospel to the Moslems of India. "Righteousness is conduct which conforms to the moral law, not in the belief of the Last Day and the Angels, or in constant prayer." "The fate of man lies in his own hands only." "Seek out the causes of disease and destroy

them." Herbert Spencer himself could not have wrought greater consternation in the quiet Sayyid household or in the little town wedded to conservative ways. This neo-Mohammedan is a Socrates and a social reformer combined. He secures the favour of the big Pathan nobleman—the lover of the dancer in the earlier tale—and the discriminating protection of the tolerant Tahsildar. He visits old acquaintances and tells them of his mission. He discourses with the poor and with the rich, in the market place, in the old bookseller's shop, on the banks of the river, in streets and lanes, and by questions and by hints excites a general eagerness to hear the new doctrine that is to regenerate the world. In a few days thus spent he unfolds his mission and departs. It is a fine story, full of quaint speech and incident, pathetic and humorous, and instinct with a great purpose.

The Pilgrimage of Premnâth, the posthumous child of the author's brain, which is now presented to the public, is a pendant to *The Path*. The latter depicts thought and movement among the Moslems of India. *The Pilgrimage of Premnâth* is the record of a Hindu banker's search for salvation. How the problem arose and what the solution was is told in these pages, and to them the reader must be referred. One or two observations may be made. In this story the tendency, perceptible in the earlier books, of the dialogue to encroach on the action of the plot and of the dialogue to be resolved into a monologue is very marked. The method has its defects. But Hindu philosophy and Hindu mysticism are not easy subjects to handle, and the author may have thought that they were best conveyed through this medium. The sage counsel and gentle wisdom of Premnâth's wife are depicted with great delicacy and charm, but the portrait provokes the question whether the spiritual vision of Indian wives is ever quite of this high order. The author breaks fresh ground in two directions. In his description of the business activities

of a great banking firm he touches on a side of Indian life which has no counterpart in the earlier stories, while the new morality and the new aims of life of which the Universities of India are sowing the seed are pleasingly exhibited in the portrait of the youth Bál gobind, the banker's grandson. A key to the book may perhaps be sought in the quotation from Wordsworth on the first page and in the dedication to the author's wife.

Edmund White had seen this book in its final form through the press before he was struck down by a fatal illness. Always a robust and hardy man, devoted to an open-air life at all seasons of the year and in all weathers, he scorned, at the advanced age of seventy-four, to take the ordinary precautions to which weaker mortals have recourse on the first symptoms of cold or chills. Exposure during the spell of bitter weather prevailing in the early weeks of this year [1918] brought on an attack of influenza. A delusive interval of recovery was followed by an acute attack of pneumonia. After a brief illness he passed quietly away on the 28th of February in his seventy-fourth year at his Sussex home at Lewes.

This brief notice of Edmund White's life and imperfect appreciation of his Indian novels have been written in response to a request to which as one of his oldest friends I could not but respond. I could wish that the pious office had fallen to abler hands. I hope, however, that in some small degree I may have contributed to keep his memory green and to direct attention to the knowledge of Indian life, the originality and the power which his writings display.

T. W. HOLDERNESS

March, 1918

THE PILGRIMAGE OF PREMNÁTH

BOOK THE FIRST

LADY RÁDHKA'S HOME

CHAPTER I

PREMNÁTH'S COUNSELLOR

IN his sixtieth year Premnāth Tiwāri, the banker of Ronāhi, began to meditate seriously on retirement from secular affairs, and the discipline of his soul for transition to a higher sphere in its progress towards the Final Goal, Emancipation from Individual Life. He had completed all the indispensable duties of his worldly station ; his son was of age and capacity to succeed to the management of the bank and estate ; thus no obligations bound him to worldly things, and he was free, should he elect to devote himself henceforth exclusively to religious meditation and the salvation of his soul.

A certain weariness had begun to afflict him : his interest in his business had become slack ; he was more and more inclined to leave matters to his son, while he employed his leisure in reading the metaphysical books of the Vedas and the commentaries, and in prolonged discussions with doctors of divinity. In this state of mind he was moved at length to lay bare his thoughts to the partner of his life, the mother of his children, without whose counsel he took no step affecting the welfare of his family.

It was the month of Bhádon, the Season of the Rains, when the soft moist breeze and shadowy clouds succeed to the parching winds and withering sun of Jeth, and the sap rises in plants and trees, and they rejoice, expanding leaf and flower and fruit.

Long before dawn Premnáth arose from his couch in the veranda of the inner court and ascended to the little open chamber on the terraced roof, where his wife, Rádhika Devi, was wont to sleep during the rainy season. The lamp, burning in a niche of the wall, lit up her figure seated on a bed : she held her drawn-up knees clasped, and, facing the breeze, watched for the first gleam of the dawn.

Taking the name of the Lord Ráma, her husband blessed her, and she answered, " My dear lord, I touch your feet. Will you not sit beside me? Already the birds grow restless and chatter over their plans for the coming day."

" Dear wife," he said, " how many years have gone by since first we watched thus for the light from the east ! "

" How many years, and how full of life ! " she replied. " The new moon of this month of Bhádon, the five-and-fortieth since I held our first child to my breast."

" A mother's calendar, dear wife."

" And twenty years have passed," she continued, sinking her voice, " since amid that storm in the month of Jeth, when clouds of burning sand darkened the house, his soul took flight, and our beloved Har Sundari, heart-broken, lay senseless in my arms."

" Through the town the cholera raged ; from us but one was taken, while——"

" But he our most precious," she interrupted.

" A wide lake of sunny memories lies between, our grief but a cloud on the distant verge."

" But his widow's life left desolate ! "

" As days passed she too found rest and comfort in the care of her son, and in ceaseless loving work for all our house.—But tell me, my life, what has turned your mind to brooding on these old griefs ? There was a shadow on your face, when I came upon you."

" Ah, you marked that, my dear lord ! " she replied, pressing him closer to her side. " Yes, I had awaked from a distressful dream, and sate looking outwards on the dark night, and before me the lamp threw my shadow. Then an awful loneliness fell upon me, and I knew that I was left in solitude, widowed of my beloved, and I cried bitterly in my heart : What evil spirit possessed thee, woman ? What dulness of brain ? What slackness of heart ? that thou didst not pass to death on thy husband's pyre, holding his head on thy knees ? No duty binds thee to live on in misery ; thy daughters married and mothers ; thy son and his wife here to rule the house—wherein will be no place for thee any more. On the pyre I had died in righteousness, aye, as the Pure One, in sure hope of reunion with my beloved, and now I live on, a blot and blight on the world, tormented by the insatiable longing of my heart.

" Then I heard you moving below ; the black vision vanished, and I cried aloud, taking your name, Jai, Síta Rám, you have vouchsafed a vision to guide when the dark closes around me, that I may follow the path ordained by the sacred law. A great calm came to my heart, that we two who are one shall never be rent in twain ! "

Rádhika Devi ceased, and silence rested upon them awhile before her husband spoke in reply.

" A dream and a vision, my beloved. And is not our work in the world complete ? How happily closed if we passed away even as we sit now, neither left to the severed life ! Aye, better I deem the passing pang of the holy Sati than the long-drawn misery of the widowed heart."

She pressed him to her side and kissed his forehead without speaking.

The clouds which had obscured the eastern sky had now separated, displaying the morning star, and Rádhika's depression vanished.

Premnáth broke the silence, speaking with some hesitation : " I too was disturbed in the night, and have lain awake long with over-active brain."

"Something has vexed you?"

"My thoughts ran on spiritual things as frequently of late."

"Have then your solitary studies and long discussions with our pandit's circle begun to bear fruit?"

"At least my meditations have so far ripened that with your counsel they may mature."

"Can I then aid in matters which our doctors profess and debate—to disagree and part?"

"Let me explain," continued Premnâth, not unaware of a tone of mockery in her words. "You have often heard, that when the householder perceives his skin to be wrinkled and his hair grey, and sees the son of his son growing in strong youth, he may rightfully withdraw from business and family ties, and devote his last days in retirement to religious study and prayer?"

"And I have heard," she replied, "that in old times substantial family men actually did abandon their homes and dwell in waste places."

"Yes, to prepare their souls for reunion with the self-existing Essence, whence the soul proceeds and wherein only can it find rest."

He paused, awaiting for some word of encouragement to proceed. But she asked only: "But, my lord, what have we to do with these venerable rules? How can it be right for men in the ripeness of their experience and wisdom to withdraw from affairs they guide so well, and abandon their families whom their love wraps about?"

He continued, ignoring her words: "Dear wife, for many days a desire has been growing stronger in my mind, to devote my time solely to prayer and study and meditation."

"But, my dear lord!" she exclaimed. "You would abandon all you have valued most—your affairs, public and private, and me and all our house—and dwell alone in the waste or with anchorets in temples!"

"Nay, not that," he answered. "I would live on here in the house undisturbed in meditation and strict ritual. I have spoken, dear wife; thou art my counsellor."

Rádhika sat in silence holding his hand pressed, and controlled her irritation. When she felt able to speak in a gentle voice, she said : " Tell me, dear husband, have you grown weary of your old life at home and abroad ? Or, are you conscious of failing capacity ? "

" I am aware of no failure in judgment or action," he replied simply. " I cope with the work of the day as it comes. Nay, dear wife, were I sinking into senility, my purpose to undertake prolonged and strenuous thought in a new sphere would be vain."

" Then you have surely grown sick of your old life and seek a change."

" Say rather that I have heard a serious call to a spiritual life."

.

Rádhika remained silent with her face raised, and as her husband watched her awaiting further speech, he saw the reflection of the morning star sparkling in the depth of her eyes.

His sudden proposal to retire from active life into the dark corner of religious seclusion came upon her as a painful shock. He was the pivot on which the orderly family life revolved, and if he withdrew dislocation followed. But to this he seemed blind, oblivious of all but the one dim end, the salvation of his soul ! It was incomprehensible that one in possession of his faculties should desire to exchange an active and beneficent life at home and abroad, for that of a religious recluse ; that he should waste his practical wisdom by turning aside to speculations which served only as subjects for dissensions among the profound doctors who from youth upwards had studied and professed them.

Surely, she thought, such an aberration must spring from hidden disorder of body or mind. If he is permitted to carry out his present purpose, he will sink so deeply in selfish meditation on his own salvation that the warm and sacred affections which now attach him to his household, will wither away in his heart. And who can say ? His first enthusiasm will

perhaps be transformed into a mechanical routine and he will become the victim of brooding melancholy. Then it will be too late to restore him, and in desolate old age he will be removed as a thing cumbering the earth !

Such thoughts flashed through her mind, most alert when her husband's welfare was concerned. But when at last she spoke she asked in a quiet voice : " Let me clearly understand, my beloved. You desire to follow in retirement discipline such as the ancient sages taught to be the way of salvation ? "

" That is so, dear wife."

" But this salvation, do you regard it as the dissolution of the soul absorbed into the Eternal Spirit ? "

" We have been taught that life is an evil, even a disease of the spirit, for which there is one only remedy, reunion of the soul with the all-pervading Essence whence it emanated."

She paused some time before she continued : " But, think, my beloved, has your life with me, with your family and amid your affairs, been a stage of such exceeding misery that you would obliterate its memory and destroy a possible repetition in another phase of existence ? "

The slow sad tones of her voice rung in his ears as a reproach, urging pitifully, Wilt thou abandon the loyal and beloved companion of thy life, here in her last years, and for ever hereafter ? An obscure feeling of shame affected him. He pressed her grey head against his cheek, and answered : " My life, the many years since we attained a mutual understanding, and above all these latter years, have been filled with happiness."

" Aye, surely, surely, my dear lord. It seemed that in the house you found, as you brought—love, care, and comfort, and even the company of your choice. And abroad in your affairs, you have exercised a sure mastery, guiding all you undertake to a prosperous end. Success abroad, happiness in your home."

" It is so, my beloved," he replied. " Though life be full of misery ; of pestilence and horrible diseases ; of bitter bereavements and calamities worse than disease ; of oppression of the weak, of buoyant hopes disappointed, of blighted lives ;

—yet amid this desert of misery my life, and thine with mine, has been as a bright oasis—aye, in itself most desirable.”

“Why then,” she exclaimed. “How comes it then, that you would annihilate this most goodly thing, that it may vanish even as though it had never been?”

“I think I do not understand, my Rádhika.”

But she continued, speaking with increasing animation: “Surely one who has rightly executed the duties of his office; who has loved and cherished his household; who has performed the daily rites of worship and piety; shall when he passes through death to a new phase, sink into no lower grade. Shall not the good fruit of his actions spring up again in a no less noble shape?”

“It is our creed,” he answered, “and I hold it true, that each man’s life hereafter is shaped by his own deeds here.”

“Aye,” she replied swiftly, “shaped by our own acts—by our joint life, worthy to endure hereafter.”

“Nevertheless,” he continued, resuming the thread of his thought, “at each stage of his soul’s life, man shall seek to attain a higher plane, and final reunion with the Eternal, even Brahman.”

“My lord,” she answered; “to sink into the Divine Spirit is to lose self as the drop of water falling into the Ganges stream. Listen, I beg, to my thoughts. I know that our doctors teach that all forms have arisen from the Divine Essence, the higher and the lower, even as out of the indifferent mass of clay the many vessels are moulded by the potter. But, the jar is a higher form than the common clay. So the images of the divine Krishna and Ráma rank higher in the scheme of things than the molten metal from which they are cast; so the temple erected from the rough stones of the quarry. And this I would venture to assert of the soul of man. If indeed it sprung from the universal indifferent spirit it is now an individual conscious soul with its own mind and heart, and thus a form higher, not lower, than the common spirit from which it was shaped.

“Ah, my lord, forgive me! I shrink from this creed, and from this purpose of thine as an act of sacrilege! That which

thou callest emancipation, salvation, is but dissolution. Surely such a spirit as thine shall not perish utterly, lost as a drop of water in vapour, as a brand in flame and smoke. It shall grow stronger and more perfect in new phases of life, an immortal tree ever expanding anew in leaf and flower and fruit.

"Ah, my love, thou shalt not seek to dissolve thyself in the spiritual dust of things. Thou shalt rather make thy Self more and more perfect, to attain a sublimity of individual life beyond the range of our utmost imagination! And in that upward course, I—my own very Self—yearn to abide with thee."

"Ah, my beloved," he replied, in a sad grave voice, "this is the cry, the bitter cry of the loving heart—misery inseparable from individual life——"

But she interrupted quickly: "Yes, all this have I heard in manifold forms from our learned doctors; sleek and withered alike deliver this and much more with solemn mien. Nevertheless, my whole nature revolts against this self-dissolution of the noble spirit. The spirit I love and esteem most holy, cannot perish as a cracked or ill-shapen jar, which the potter casts aside to dissolve in the common clay from which he failed to mould it well. I love thee, my lord, and would be united with thee in endless love!

"That we twain should be lost in the vacancy of the universal Unconscious Spirit—the thought is hateful. To seek to destroy this joint life of our love, frenzy from some terrible error! I affirm, the strong and beautiful spirit displayed in a noble life shall never dissolve in the ocean of infinite being!"

Then her husband, deeply moved by her words, pondered in his heart: "If this individual life be a degradation of the holy spirit, how comes it that one so good and wise, so full of love and pity, clings to it with such intense desire? Surely what this woman desires with all her soul cannot be an evil thing!"

And he answered, very gently: "Dear wife, thou hast ever

sought the best for me, for our children and our children's children. Thy love has been guided by wisdom, and how often hast thou grasped the right with rapid hand, where I have groped fumbling to find a way. How then shall I deny that even in these mysteries thy pure intuition may pierce to the root ?

“ But, dear wife, the world-wisdom which I have received as a revelation to the Rishis, the seers of hidden things, and as interpreted by the great Teachers of the past—this cannot be lightly set aside. Prolonged study and meditation are needed even to comprehend the doctrine. And now that I am free from worldly duties, I desire to enter on this holy task in quietness of mind. Thus it is that I crave to resign the concerns of the passing day.”

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There was a long silence between them before the lady Rádika replied, speaking in a quiet tone : “ If it indeed be your well-considered purpose and mature will to devote your time exclusively to acquiring a deeper insight into spiritual things, then I would in no way hinder you, but rather aid. But, my beloved, I would first be assured that this desire is the genuine expression of the permanent needs of your heart, and not merely the craving of a mind needing rest and change from the strenuous life you have led so long. I would therefore pray you to defer for a while your final decision to abandon entirely your business public and private and your care for our household affairs.

“ And there is a middle course, which while it will enable you to advance some way towards your object, will not involve complete severance from your past duties. I would counsel a period of probation during which not only the permanence of your desire for a life of holy contemplation may be tested, but also the capacity of our son to succeed to the place you will relinquish.

“ You remember how often we have spoken of undertaking the great pilgrimage through the shrines of Hind. Now at length we are free. Let us don the pilgrim garb and pass

round the circle of the holy places : to Dwárka on the Land's End, sacred to the Lord Krishna ; to Rameshwar Rám, where the Lord Ráma looked across the southern strait to the Isle of Lanka ; and thence to the seat of the Lord of the World on the eastern sea ; and even, winding back, to our lady Parvati of the Snows. Many and great things will come before us, and new enlightening thoughts out of the wide world of which our Ronáhi circle is so small a part. You will converse with learned doctors of the South, and who knows but you may meet a true master and teacher who will reveal more clearly the truth of hidden things ; and this, clarified in your practical mind, you may perhaps pass on to my understanding.

" In the meantime—and this, knowing both, I regard of no little moment—our son and his wife will be put to a fair test. If during our long absence they prove capable of maintaining unimpaired our estate at home and abroad, then should you still desire to withdraw from the world—and I with you—then we can be satisfied that all will be well with the old house, although your hand no longer guides.

" Such, my beloved, is my counsel, and I beseech you, ponder over it in quiet and then decide what is best. But—let me not be severed from thee ! Thou art the sun of all my life, and without thy rays I perish in darkness and bitter cold ! "

There was tender emotion in the tone of her husband's voice as pressing her to his side he answered : " As thou sayest, my beloved and wisest counsellor, so it may well be best. Surely from mouth of a loving wife, whose hair is grey and brain is clear, there may issue forth wisdom no less than that we gather from the meditations of doctors of holy writ. It shall be as you wish : I will consider all this you have urged—and none can have greater weight with me."

And now the pale dawn shone upon them, and they looked on each other with eyes of the holy love which was the crown of their many days of wedded life.

The bell sounded from Mahadeo's temple on the river-bank, and from the mosque there came the melodious call to prayer.

CHAPTER II

THE SEVERED LIFE

THE Lady Rádika remained awhile seated as her husband had left her, looking outwardly to the dawning day, but conscious only of depression as from an impending calamity. She murmured the words of her prayer :—

“ Deliver me from evil,
Thou, from whom all good cometh,
Ráma, whom all revere,—
On thee I call, to thee I send my prayer.”

She had awaked oppressed by an awful dream of bereavement, and yearning for holy death on the funeral pyre of her husband. Aroused from this dark vision, she had learnt his wish to relinquish all secular affairs and retire into religious seclusion : death in life for him ; for her, a barren future stripped of things of most worth. And now her quick apprehension began to discern fatal disturbance of her beloved home, in the middle course for which she had pleaded.

She had already visited with her husband many of the holy places of Northern India : Hardwár and Ajudhia, Prág and Mathura, Benáres, Gayá and Chatrkot. But for her these pilgrimages had been the festival of the year ; happy jaunts in which she with the ladies of her family and many congenial neighbours, had enjoyed unwonted freedom of movement, seen many delightful things, and then returned after short absence, bearing cherished gifts and memories, to find her home unchanged, and the household eager to welcome the loved mistress.

How different would be this great circle of Pilgrimage through the Holy Places of the South to endure two long years,

with no companionship for her while her husband passed his time with learned and prayerful men ! Meantime her son and his wife would be left master and mistress of the house. When she at last returned to displace her daughter-in-law, the harmony between them would surely come to an end, and her son be alienated by the soreness of his wife at her supersession. She would be an intruder in her old home ; or more painful still, yield her rightful place to the younger woman.

The morning dream again settled upon her as a portent of the desolation of her life, until the bustle of the women in the courtyard aroused her to the first duty of prayer and ritual ; and casting off her melancholy mood, she led them down the hollow way to the bathing ghát below the temple.

The busy morning followed : ordering of the household, inspection of the children ; pleasant chatter with their mothers, distribution of food, and cooking and the morning meal ; and not until noon had passed was the mistress of the house free. But in the stillness of the afternoon rest, Rádika went aside to the little chamber where her widowed daughter-in-law, Har Sundari, had retired for meditation and prayer—for it was the Eleventh of the waxing moon, the day of her fast from food and drink.

The widow was sitting on a mat with head bent forward and her right hand in the bag which held her rosary, and, unconscious of her mother-in-law's approach, she continued murmuring her prayer. When she slowly raised her head, there appeared, beneath the hood of her white *sári*, a thin, wan face, calm as the face of death.

She rose to her knees and bowing over the feet of her mother-in-law, murmured, " Mother, honoured mother."

" May I sit with you, my daughter ? " said Rádika. " I thought your hour of prayer had passed."

The widow pressed the proffered hand to her forehead and answered : " I was dreaming, and my lips move unconsciously repeating the Holy Name."

" In this still house we muse and note not how the moments fly. The rustle of the rain, the sweet scent of the wet leaves and moistened earth, call up a dream-like reverie as we sit

alone. But when help is needed, who so quick and ready as you to shake off this mood ? So I come assured of welcome."

Then the thoughtful expression of the widow's countenance changed to that of one eager to listen.

"Ah, mother of my beloved," she exclaimed, "I pray you sit here beside me, and tell me how I can aid you."

Rádhika took the widow's thin hand in her firm grasp. The still courtyard before them was filled with the grey light of the sunless day ; there was no sound or motion but the dripping of the rain from the eaves into the channels through which it trickled away into the outer court.

As they sate side by side the contrast between them was striking. The ample grey hair of the elder, brushed back from the temples and marked at the parting with bright vermilion, formed a fitting crown for the handsome forehead, smooth cheeks and full lips. Heavy gold pendants hung from her ears, and from her nostril a large ring of gold wire bearing a single pearl. On her strong arms were bracelets of red gold set with gems ; and her ample sári of yellow silk was edged with a narrow braid of gold. It was a figure of health and strength, and the rich garments and jewellery seemed a fit adornment of her strong life.

The widow, twenty years younger, seemed the elder of the two. Her nose was pinched, her cheeks hollow, her lips thin and colourless ; and a maze of wrinkles spread from the corners of her eyes and mouth. Enclosed in the muslin hood, her face was like a fine cameo carved on a white ground. Her hair was close-cut. No jewel adorned her person, and no colour broke the austerity of the face and garments.

"Oh, little mother," said the old dame, tenderly caressing her, "this cruel day of thy fasting, how much I hate it !"

"Hush, mátáji," replied the widow in gentle remonstrance ; "hush, I pray you. The four-and-twenty sacred hours fly swiftly by, each devoted to the memory of your son, my beloved, and at times I seem with him, and the aching of my heart is stilled."

"Well, well, my darling, I will be silent on this sore subject. Thou art the holy one ; thou knowest what is good for thee

and for that lost one, who lies closest to our hearts, to thine and mine. But come, didst thou hear the voice of Indráin as she chanted over her babe the new cradle-song sent by thy Bál gobind ? ”

“ Yes, indeed I heard the chant and the crowing of the babe in her lap,” answered the widow, her face brightening with a smile. “ And I thought what grace was mine to rear so good a son, and live to love his baby boy.”

“ I told you what my husband heard from one of the professors at his college ? ”

“ Yes, but tell me again.”

“ That the lad’s industry was equal to his ability, and he was pre-eminent in both.”

“ Honoured mother,” replied the widow, “ my son is your veritable grandchild—and yet, I am still haunted by anxiety lest this new learning of the West lead even him astray from the ways of his fathers.”

“ Did you mark anything in his speech or mood to trouble you ? ”

“ Nothing definite,” replied the widow. “ But the boding heart of a mother is aware of a tendency to change, even as in the darkness a bird of the approach of dawn. Only this I know, honoured mother, if I may speak it with due respect : his spirit is like yours as are his features : in judgment he is independent and fearless, and he will act as he himself thinks right, not otherwise. His piety will be moved by that only to which he himself feels reverence due.”

Rádhika. For him the dust of his mother’s feet is hallowed, and he will ever serve and obey thee. Ah, happy thou, to see thy son grown to this fair manhood and to nurse his son upon thy knees.

Har Sundari. Ráma, the compassionate, hath brought peace to my heart and no little content.

The Lady Rádhika sat silent awhile looking out moodily on the softly falling rain, and the gloom of her morning dream and vision gathered once more as a cloud about her heart.

“ For you, dear daughter,” she said, in a mournful tone,

"time held in reserve this healing boon. But for me, bereft of my dear lord, no hope of comfort would remain. All that life can give has been mine, and sons I have seen even to the third generation."

"O mother, dear mother," exclaimed Har Sundari, "what words of ill omen are these?"

Rádhika. Nay, daughter, no evil omen lies therein. It is my wont to look forward with unfaltering heart, to foresee, and in calmness prepare for trouble to come, before the shock benumbs the power of thought. I know that when my dear lord passes away the light of my life goes out, and I would not live in the darkness of bereavement.

Har Sundari. Dear mother, I endured to live.

Rádhika. Held by holy duty to thy young son. All the duties of my life are fulfilled. Thou, and my son's wife, and the wife of thy son, all are here to rule and guard this household. For me there will be no place left; when my dear lord passes my work is done.

Har Sundari. How dare you to affirm that for your wise head and loving heart no work remains?

Rádhika. I have said, and I know. None shall suffer in vain.

Har Sundari. In suffering is purification of the spirit.

Rádhika. From fear of death to cling to a useless life of pain brings no purification to the sufferer. And there is a hallowed path of escape. But, tell me this, little daughter. Is not thy son, our Bál gobind, fearless in pursuing what he deems right?

The widow looked up in surprise at the sudden change of the subject, and the strange question. She answered: "He is indeed young, but I can trust to his steadfast spirit."

Rádhika. One who would do his mother's bidding to the end?

Har Sundari. I would enjoin on him nothing but what is righteous; and in piety he would obey.

Rádhika. Surely, surely. . . . Your Bál gobind is a son after my own heart. But tell me again—of my own son, your brother-in-law Dwá rkánáth. How do you esteem him?

The widow hesitated before she replied in deliberate words :
 " I speak, dear mother, but at your command. His heart is kind, his ways are gentle ; his affections are easily moved, and his cheerful presence brings joy to the house. I think, too, his ability is notable."

Rádhika. True, but you would add, he lacks earnestness ; loves ease and pleasant ways ; would gladly shirk a painful task.

Har Sundari. He is pious at heart, and in his piety might find a source of courage.

Rádhika. Therein lies the doubt, which only the test of action can resolve. But if to your son a grave task were assigned, we know he would not shrink. Thus, little daughter, if your insight and mine discern the same things behind the veil of our loved ones' faces, there can be no error.

Then the Lady *Rádhika* paused, and caressing the thin hand of the widow felt its palm hardened by household work. She continued speaking quietly :

" But to return to that of which I spoke. Dear daughter, know this. When my lord departs, I will not live, but will follow on that most holy path held open for the widow—quick death on the pyre of her lord. Holding the dear head on my knees, I will depart : one in life, joined in death."

Har Sundari. Mother, dear mother, what words are these ?

Rádhika. Thou knowest that the Sati is esteemed the most holy of women.

Har Sundari. We worship at her shrine, the shrine of the Pure One.

Rádhika. Then when the day comes thou shalt aid me in this most holy purpose.

Har Sundari. I, so helpless !

Rádhika. Thy son is thy agent. He shall lead me to the pyre and kindle the flame.

Har Sundari. My son !

Rádhika. None other.

Har Sundari. None other than your own son can set flame to his father's pyre.

Rádhika. Have we not said that my son hath not the strong heart for such a deed ?

Har Sundari. But, mother, dear mother, you surely know—our Rulers forbid this holy sacrifice, and lay a terrible penalty on all who aid therein.

Rádhika. Well, child ?

Har Sundari. It falls on the household from which the Sati goes forth : all shall suffer, but chiefly he who leads her to the pyre and starts the flame. Oh, mother, your son and mine, the very pillars of the house, and with their fall, the whole shall crumble !

Rádhika. Who taught thee this ?

Har Sundari. Who but my son ? Listen. It was near Bilhaur, out in the waste, and the widow secretly followed the bier. She had compelled her son, under threat of her curse. She held the head in her lap, and the flame shot up above her. And then—and then, the police ran in from Kakwán, to stifle the flames ; but the son with his friends withstood them, and the happy widow attained salvation for herself and her beloved. But the son, and all who stood thereby—the whole manhood of the village—all now lie in bondage, herded with the basest of men. The household and village are left waste, that all may know the command of our Rulers and the penalty that falls on those who dare to disobey.

Rádhika. Horrible ! What impious rule is this that closeth the right way to the widow ! Aye, I have heard of this ban of impiety. But listen, little daughter, if your son seeks a way he will surely find it. And none shall know of our purpose, only you and I and your son. I will leap on the pyre as the flame leaps up, and vanish in flame and smoke.

Har Sundari. Alas, dear mother, the deed could not be hidden. Our whole house will be destroyed, our children perish !

Rádhika. Bid thy son act and he will find a way of safety. Ah, my daughter, wilt thou not grant me this one request—me, who have cherished thee in love through all the days of thy sorrow ?

The widow's head sunk on her knees and she struggled to control the sobs which threatened to deprive her of the power of speech. When at length she had recovered her self-control, she bowed over her mother's feet and spoke :

" Listen then, dear mother ; let me speak freely what is in my heart, and answer me as freely. You have shuddered through every fibre at the blank misery which is all that is left when the loved one departs, the supreme pain of a woman's life for which no anodyne is granted. Is this so ? "

Rádhika. I have shuddered at the brink of a dark abyss, wherein is no light or hope.

Har Sundari. No other motive urges you to the sacrifice, oh my mother ?

Rádhika. What other is needed ? Without him my life is hopeless and a shame to endure.

Har Sundari. Aye, prolonged and fruitless misery. And this alone impels you to the deed ?

Rádhika. Enough, surely more than enough, as thou knowest best.

Har Sundari. Ah, would that I could obliterate the long-drawn agony of those days !

Rádhika. Ah, my beloved, thou seest eye to eye with me now.

Har Sundari. But, mother, you know that the Sati gains for her husband a myriad years of bliss.

Rádhika. Aye, so they say ; and they have said many things.

Har Sundari. And that the holiness of the act lies solely in the sacrifice of self for the beloved ?

Rádhika. True, true ; but of our state hereafter the learned masters teach many and various things.

Har Sundari. And that the holiness and purity of the Sati consists in this only, that for herself she seeks nothing ; her deed is unstained by thought of self, not even of escape from the sorrow and pangs of her loss.

Rádhika. What dost thou mean, Har Sundari ?

Har Sundari. This, most honoured mother. You seek one thing only : to escape, without dishonour, from the pangs of

bereavement, from a hollow life passed in the insatiable longings of an aching heart. But herein there is no pure act of sacrifice ; only an end beginning and ending in Self. Not for you then to be the Pure One, the Sati ; not for you is the sacred way open. Your act would be impure in the source, and vain. For this you would expose our honoured house to ruin, and my son to destruction : that you may avoid for a few, very few years of an aged life, what I have suffered in patience through fifteen years of my prime.

Oh, forgive my words, dear and honoured mother of my dead lord—but I must speak as I see into the motives even of your most tender heart !

Rádhika. Oh, Sundari, Sundari, thy words are stern and bitter !

Har Sundari. The way of the Pure One, the Sati, is the way of complete self-renunciation ; if not, then is her end no purer than that of the girl who in a tumult of passion leaps down the nearest well !

Rádhika sat with downcast head clasping the widow's hand till it was crushed to numbness. But the widow endured the pain without sound or movement.

" Sundariya," she cried at last, " thou hast woven these subtleties to save thy son from risk—a little risk ! "

" Mother," replied the widow firmly. " As the truth is revealed to me, so I have spoken—not otherwise. And now I dare speak boldly : it is not fit that our house should collapse under the stern hand of our Rulers, even to save you from this terror of grief.

" Nevertheless, mother, if you will show me clearly hereafter, that you seek only to gather this flower of a woman's life, that with entire purity of purpose you desire only the salvation of your lost husband ; that your heart is cleansed of any selfish end : then, indeed, I could aid, and I think my son would act."

Then Rádhika passed her arm round the widow's neck, drew her closer to her side, and remained silent. When at last she spoke, her voice was very tender :

" My daughter, wife of my dear lost son, thou hast lived

through these long lonely years, solely for the sake of thy beloved son, to tend and guide him through the tangled path of life. Thou art the Pure One, even the living Sati. But, daughter, dear daughter, know this, I have no firm faith in much which these dreaming *sádhus* and *jogis*, *pandits* and *gurus*—all visionaries of things unseen—set forth as revelations of the ancient saints. Thou, sweet woman, art a teacher for me wiser than they. May all good befall thy son, and above all, may he prove worthy of the mother who endured for him.”

Then she kissed the widow's forehead and departed, murmuring as she crossed the courtyard : “ Not then to fly from the fated sorrow, but to live and subdue : this then is the rule of purification for the heart.”

CHAPTER III

THE HOUSEHOLD

THE Lady Rádika stood leaning her hand against the carved pillar of the arcade. The gentle rain had ceased, and the music of the trickling water was still ; in the grey courtyard was no sound or movement. But as she stood thus, pausing on her way, the rays of the afternoon sun filled the courtyard with a transient gleam. The *maina* in his cage hung from the arch, fluttered on its perch, and in solemn tone repeated the words of the dirge :—

“ Ráma náma sattná hai ! ”

“ The name of Ráma alone is Real.”

“ Oh, thou foolish creature ! ” exclaimed Rádika, looking up at the hopping bird. “ Say :—

‘ Piyá sáth sachcha hai ! ’

‘ With the Beloved is reality ! ’

‘ Sáth joru khasam ká. ’

‘ Company full and perfect,

‘ One only—man with wife. ’ ”

Then the silence was happily broken by the laughter of women and children, and Indráin, the young wife of the absent grandson, stepped out into the sunny space, bearing her infant in her arms. The hood of her *sári* lay back on her shoulders displaying the round glossy head, delicate features and slender neck, and released from the bodice the full bosom of a nursing mother. She dandled her babe in the sunshine, crooning unintelligible words over him, until perceiving her grandmother, she shyly drew up her veiling-sheet and advanced respectfully but with laughing face.

"Oh, thou happy little woman," said Rádika. "The babe ripples with laughter like the holy river in the sunlight!"

The girl-wife held up the child to be caressed, and replied: "I promised he should catch the first gleam of the sun, and through three days of cloud I have watched for its coming, and now he has worshipped the Sun-God!"

Thus prattling with the babe in words of no meaning except to loving women, they went together to the spacious veranda separated from the great outer court by a pierced-stone screen, where, seated with her little daughter, preparing bital leaves for *pán*, was Tára Muni, wife of Dwárkánáth, a plump comfortable lady of thirty, with a coarse but good-natured face.

Mother and daughter arose respectfully before the old dame, and then all three took their seats around the board spread with the lime, catechu and cardamoms for dressing the bital. Indráin and the little girl washed, clipped and slit the dark green leaves, and the two elder women filled and folded them, both skilled in mixing the spices for a dainty taste. Meantime the babe, on a pillow between the young mother and the grandam, gurgled and fell asleep. Tára Muni and Indráin chatted with voluble tongues over the trifles of the passing day, bantering and laughing, and the elder lady listened with a smile while her quick fingers rolled and packed the *pán*.

An hour had flown by unnoticed when the house-door opened noisily and a scuffling of quick feet sounded in the outer court. Tára Muni dropped the leaf she had taken and moved to rise; but Indráin detained her, and, offering her a dressed *pán* leaf, chanted laughing:—

"Sab ki padáráth *pán* hai, ek hi augan, áh!
Já ke kar pe dharat hain, bidá karat hain, táh!"

"Though best of all dainties is *pán*,
Its one fault sends pain to the heart.
If you offer the leaf to a friend,
He will straightway arise and depart!"

Tára Muni accepted the *pán* with a bow and a laugh, and hurried with her little daughter to the entrance of the outer court, where she was met by her two sons, boys of ten and six,

on their return from school, eager to embrace their mother and relate the incidents of the day.

The grandam and young mother remained to pack the dressed bital leaves in little baskets and *pán* boxes ready for the household and visitors.

"Honoured mother," began Indráin, after a short silence. "You do think I am very unfortunate, parted these many, many days from my dear husband?"

"My darling," replied Rádhika, "I do think husband and wife should not be separated."

Indráin. Then as he cannot be here, I should go to him at Benáres?

Rádhika. And take your babe with you, of course.

Indráin. How could I leave him?

Rádhika. And live in lodgings, alone all day and much of the night, with no friend by to nurse you and the babe if you were sick?

Indráin. Oh, I am very strong, and my babe is an infant Lakshman. I would cook the food, the dainties my lord likes best.

Rádhika. But through the long hours of his absence, you would sit lonely and sadly sing—you know the song?

"Sájan dukhyá kar gae, sukh ko le gae sáth,
Janam bichhoyá de gae, ghari na baithe pás."

"My lord departs and leaves me pain,
All joy he bears away;
For short the time he tarries near,—
I am lonely all the day."

And the poor lad, your husband, would be harassed thinking of your solitude, distracted in his studies which require all his time and attention. And we at home here should fret, thinking of your lonely days, and of our dear Bálgobind hindered in his task. So, little bride, we will make life bright for you here, well assured that so it is best for all—not least for Bálgobind, who loves you most.

The soothing voice and words checked the petulance of the young wife, and she exclaimed : " I will be patient ; but, you will let me grumble sometimes that my beloved is away ; and when you talk to me like this, I will be good again."

Then Tára Muni rejoined them with her three children, and the chamber resounded again with their chatter and laughter and the crowing of the babe on his mother's lap, music sweet to the ears of Rádhika Devi.

On the opposite side of the inner court, the fasting widow sate alone. She had woven herself in phantom bonds, which she could not loosen and live. In her mind's eye she beheld her son's wife glorified as the Holy Mother Kausalya with the divine child Ráma in her lap. Then she heard the step of her brother-in-law, Dwárkánáth, crossing the outer court, and the cry of the children, " Father is coming," and their quick steps running to meet him, and the clamour that followed.

Fifteen years had passed since the death of her husband, but her heart ached again with the pangs of bereavement. She shifted her seat to see Dwárkánáth enter, bow over his mother's feet and then turn to his wife. Then the vague feeling as of anger again entered her heart, that fate had snatched away *her* jewel, rather than his brother Dwárkánáth—taken the best, and left the one of little worth. But she stifled the sinful thought as it struggled to light—now as so often before.

And while she sat motionless as a bronze figure, her daughter-in-law, Indráin, approached timidly.

" Come, little daughter," said the widow. " Sit by me. Where is the babe ? "

" Sleeping by the grandmother," replied the girl and touching her feet, she took a seat on the mat.

" Oh, mother," she exclaimed, " how should I live without my babe, your son so long away ! "

" I would he were always with us," replied the widow.

" Then," cried Indráin impetuously : " you and I and the babe, let us all three go to live with him. How happy might we be ! "

The widow took the girl's hand between her palms and felt comfort holding it. And Indráin encouraged, continued : " I could tend you and him and the babe, and do all the household work. What a happy little party ! "

The widow pressing the girl's hand, replied : " Your busy little head has devised a pretty plan."

" And the babe would thrive best under his father's eyes and from the ease of my heart ! "

The widow looked affectionately on the animated face, and asked quietly : " But, my dear, do you think my son would be pleased if we went to him ? "

" How should he not be ? " replied Indráin with confidence. " He loves his mother and me and his little son."

" But has he besought us to go ? "

" Perhaps he has not thought of it," answered Indráin.

" Oh, but he is quick of thought," replied the widow. " He must have some good reason for not inviting us."

" But," urged Indráin, " if we told him we wished to come, he would cry, ' Come, oh, come quickly ! ' "

" I am quite sure," returned the widow, " that he would be pained to refuse."

" But why should he deny us and himself this happiness ? "

" I will tell you what I think, my dear. Like a *sádhú* or even a *jogi*, day and night he is absorbed in his studies, and into these the delights of love must not intrude to disturb his mind. He has to shun delights and live austere as a pious student bent only on mastering his task. So, my darling, as we love him, we will do nothing to tempt him aside from the difficult path he would follow. Nay, we will cheerfully accept separation as best for our dear one."

The young wife felt there was an invisible but insurmountable barrier between her and her heart's desire, and that the ways of life were beset with renunciation and sacrifice of self for the beloved.

" Dear mother of my lord," she said mournfully. " Then I must suffer in patience and rear my babe strong to be his father's pride."

But the widow's head had sunk upon her breast, and she

reeled sideways against the girl, fainting, exhausted from the strain of speaking so long at the close of her fast.

Rádhika came quickly across the court, laid the fainting woman on her back with lowered head, sprinkled water and fanned her face. The sun had now set and the period of the fast was complete. They bore her to a couch, gave her spiced rice-water to drink, and after a little while a sweet plantain. Then she sank into a profound sleep.

But Rádhika thought with vexed mind : Monstrous surely ! through slow torture to destroy the life of this good woman in order to save her most pure soul ! And she recalled the saying of the great reformer, often heard from the lips of her father : " The body is the shrine of the Soul : use it not despitefully."

CHAPTER IV

MOTHER AND SON

LEAVING the widow to the care of Tára Muni and Indráin, the Lady Rádika crossed the courtyard to the little hall on the west side, and aided by her servant Mohani lit the lamps, with due worship to the kindled flame. The mirrors on the walls, the tinselled pictures and the flower vases of polished brass in the niches glittered brilliantly, and with the thick carpet of interwoven red and white, and cushions of saffron silk, gave the room an aspect of luxury and comfort in marked contrast to the bare matted chamber in which she had left the widow.

Bidding the servant invite her son to come to her, she took her seat at the back of the hall, whence, through the arched veranda, she could look across the court now illuminated by the twelfth day moon.

Dwárkánáth soon appeared ; a handsome man past his thirtieth year ; broad-shouldered, but still slim of waist, and moving with easy grace. His complexion was of the light brown known as wheat-colour ; his eyes, almond-shaped and shaded with long lashes, cast a languishing expression over his countenance when in repose. His moustache was carefully trimmed, and the rest of his face clean-shaven. A white embroidered cap, a white waistcloth of the amplest folds, and a muslin sheet thrown carelessly over his shoulders, completed his easy costume.

He approached with a pleasant smile, exposing his small regular teeth, stained with the red *pán* ; and his mother gazed with pleasure on his sleek figure, contrasting it involuntarily with the ascetic aspect of the saintly woman she had just left.

He took his seat in front of his mother, and leaned easily against a cushion, gently swaying a palm-leaf fan.

"I was sorry to call away Tára Muni before you had finished your meal," said Rádhika apologetically.

"Ah, you know her fixed idea, mother," he replied complacently; "that I cannot enjoy my dinner unless she watches every morsel I swallow. But, tell me, how fares our poor sister-in-law?"

"She will be quite well when she takes full nourishment. She is very strong. A delicate woman would have perished long ago under her fasts and austerities."

"The path of sainthood is not easy to travel," said Dwárkánáth. "But the rougher, the holier. We all reverence her lotus feet."

"May the end achieved compensate the loss of golden days," remarked Rádhika drily.

"Assuredly her prayers and fasting should waft my brother's soul to bliss."

"Well, well," returned his mother, "as to that—may *you* long enjoy the savoury food and the varied delights each day brings. But, tell me, have you spoken to your father since your return?"

"He was engaged with the Tahsildar," replied Dwárkánáth. "I just greeted him, and hurried home."

"Ah, your mouth watered to get back to Muniya's dainty curries! But I want to know whether you have noticed any change in your father?"

"In what way?"

"Well—an inclination to withdraw from business?"

"His public business has increased, and he naturally leaves our private affairs more in my charge."

"And you can deal with them just as well?"

Dwárkánáth smiled complacently: "My father is neither so enterprising nor so quick in decision as formerly. And as I said, a man cannot devote himself to public matters properly without neglecting his own business."

"No doubt—unless he redoubles his energy," said Rádhika, and after a pause asked: "What took you to Háfizganj?"

"Arrangements for a loan to the Thákurs at Tikori, which we are concerting with the Khatri bankers."

"Then you stopped at their house?"

"Of course," replied her son. "And they gave us a grand entertainment. All the leading people were present—from town and district. They brought out one of the most accomplished of singers, a really remarkable personage."

"Where did she come from?"

"From Rámgarh, a Pátar woman; our connoisseurs raved about her."

"They are easily inflamed by a new actress," remarked Rádhika drily.

"No doubt. But her grace of movement and her singing certainly were marvellous."

"I hear that your friend Fakírchand manages all the business there," said Rádhika. "They tell me, too, he is an extravagant fellow and a pursuer of strange women."

"Fakírchand is a smart man of business," answered Dwárkánáth. "But he does play high in the Diwáli—as do so many others."

"You would mitigate the vices of your friend. I suppose he brought down this Pátar woman?"

"Yes, he discovered her, when he was at the Sáhu's house at Almora. I wanted him to let her perform once and again, but he refused. Of course he had specious excuses, for he is always ready with his tongue, is little Fakíra."

"I should advise you to avoid intimacy with the man."

"Oh, I know his measure, mother," replied Dwárkánáth with his complacent smile. "He is useful, and amuses me, and there the matter ends."

"I recollect your father was much annoyed with the fellow's ribald talk when he was last here. But let him pass for a gambler and whoremonger. What other news bring you from Háfizganj?"

"Oh, that will interest you—one Gadádhar, a Paramahamsa Sanyási, was there."

"Paramahamsa? What grade or sect is that?"

"Thus I understand it from what I gathered," replied

Dwárkánáth. "When a disciple of the philosopher Sankara reaches the highest pinnacle of wisdom and sanctity, all knowledge is spread out to his view, as the plains and hills, the rivers and seas to the soaring swan. He becomes conscious of his identity with the Divine Spirit, and discerns that all doctrines, however irreconcilable they seemed, constitute in reality parts of one great harmonious whole. Such is the prerogative of the Paramahansa or Saint. Few, indeed, very few, are the disciples capable of the long years of severe discipline, abstruse study and profound meditation required for the ascent to this sublime altitude!"

"So I should suppose," remarked Rádika. "Well, what had he to teach, this wonderful man?"

"His lecture was most eloquent," replied Dwárkánáth. "But I confess, he dealt with many profound matters beyond my comprehension."

"Naturally," said Rádika. "The view of the swan soaring in the upper air could be appreciated only by another swan on the wing by the first—and he would not need to be taught."

"Well," replied her son, somewhat nettled by her tone. "This much was quite clear in his doctrine: he maintained that there is truth in all the conflicting creeds of our sects, and that the great all-inclusive principle of the universe is to be discerned by combining the elements of truth from each, and not by refuting the mingled error. And he taught further, that every one should follow the creed which commends itself to his heart; and he denounced strongly any attempt to impose one's own creed on another."

"Well, so far," remarked Rádika, "he taught something practical. Though perhaps on this principle, every one may set up to be his own spiritual master! You were much interested?"

"Indeed I was."

"And what did your friend Fakírchand think of the discourse?"

"Oh, Fakíra, he is not serious in dealing with these speculations. But he commended it as a most comfortable doctrine,

for whichever sect you follow you must, in some measure at least, be right. He thought he should join the Bauls."

"I never heard of them."

"They are extravagant followers of the philosopher Chaitanya, who teach that true religious exercise is found in the rites of Love."

"Well," replied Rádika, "under wise and severe restrictions against abuse, their doctrine might be acceptable to good people. But your friend seeks only licence for the devices of his diseased heart; a moral cloak to cover his pruriency. But what did you yourself think of this high doctrine of your learned lecturer?"

"Well, I am little versed in world-wisdom to judge," replied Dwárkánáth. "Still the outcome of his teaching seemed practical, that a man who would lead a pious life needs some definite doctrine, ceremonial and ritual, to guide him; of these there are many, and though they differ, yet they are all holy. Thus the rule of piety, like food and habits, is not the same for every one. And if he had laid down in addition to this, the practical precept, that if a man is born in any one of the great recognized creeds, he had best adhere to its rules—I should have been well disposed to agree with him. He would at least be preserved from the aberrations of such fanciful sectarians as the Bauls."

"Well said, my son," replied Rádika. "But I would go farther and add, if a man is a good son, a good husband, good father, and holds sacred all the bonds of the family—then whatever his sect, it is surely good."

"But, mother," urged Dwárkánáth, "that is but a worldly addition. What we are concerned with is whether the creed and ritual lead to salvation. A man may be purified by his faith and practice, although he neglect his worldly duties."

"Well, my dear," returned his mother, with the decision of an old conviction; "if a man neglects these sacred duties of life, abandons the world and all its ties, and sits in a corner doing nothing but breathing, dreaming, musing, he is dead to the world and me; and I am not the least concerned what may be his peculiar creed. And as to his salvation, whether

he perishes utterly or attains to absorption or what not, that I don't believe any one really knows, however much your holy folk may affirm and asseverate ; and I really don't think any of us need particularly care, unless we ourselves are going to turn to hermits."

Her son looked up in surprise at her vehemence and sudden outbreak of heresy. " But, dear mother," he said, in a tone of remonstrance, " what has moved you to such bitterness against our *sádhus* ? "

" Aye, *sádhus* ! " she exclaimed. " For these few holy men, salvation and heaven ; for the millions of honest folk, misery and hell. But, you are right, my son, something has indeed moved me to bitterness to-day. I asked you just now whether you had lately noticed any change in your father's way ? "

" My father ? What do you mean ? "

" Yes, it is of him I would speak to you," replied Rádika. " All these years—how many ? I cannot count them—he has lived a noble life, and I have never ceased to revere and love and serve him. He has guided me and all the household in righteousness and wisdom, and we have been happy in our duties at home. Each day with all its little burdens has been a feast and now lives sweet in memory. If there is a holy life, then surely this life of ours has been holy—for him, for me, for our children, and all our household. And his days abroad have been filled with duties and tasks which brought their own reward, for he loved the active life ; even as I loved mine, filled with the ordering of my house, the care of you all, aye, and the little daily ceremonies of our easy creed which fix a holy bond round the family hearth. Surely, surely, I say, if there be a holy life—this life is holy.

" But now—I think that perhaps weakened by hidden disorder, he has listened to the counsel of some specious teacher, such as that man Gadádhar of whom you spoke ; now he, who has ever been so wise and practical, he would stamp all this past life as profane ; he would abandon it and withdraw into seclusion, to seek only his God and his own salvation ; his own exclusive profit and comfort, apart from all he has loved ! "

"But, mother," exclaimed her son, when she paused: "explain to me. Does he seek to follow that old, old way of the ancient rule, and retreat to a hut in the waste? Surely not!"

"No; at present, at least, I think he means no more than to retire from business, private and public, to sever his ties to 'worldly things' and live on at home devoted to study, meditation and austerities. But when the bounds of common sense are passed, there remains nothing to limit the excesses of a recluse! The way is opened to any enormity of self-torture.

"But enough: I find it difficult to express my feelings without using words which seem irreverent and even blasphemous! I now speak of this strange purpose of your father's, because I need your help to save him taking such a fatal step."

"But, mother," urged her son, though timidly, overawed by her decision and vehemence, "it is granted that the highest spiritual benefit is gathered from devotion to pious exercises and meditation on the Divinity."

"My son," she answered, "I have told you what I regard as the most holy life; yes, notwithstanding all the doctors and spiritual teachers think to find in their ancient books and hoary science. If your father abandons this to follow their teaching, I will indeed never cease to tend him and love him with all my heart, but as one stricken with a spiritual disease. I shall live in sorrow, hoping always he may awaken to the error of his way. And I call upon you, my son, to help me to preserve your father for his house, his family, and for me, even to the very end."

"Nay then, honoured mother," he replied, bowing over her feet submissively, "your wish is ever for me a sacred rule, and I cannot but obey. But how can I restrain the pious motions of his heart to the holy life?"

"I will tell you, my son. You can aid, and none other. Never will he abandon the work of his life at home and abroad, unless he is convinced that his guidance is no longer needed. It is for you to persuade him that his constant superintendence

is indispensable. Convince him that you feel yourself to be really efficient only in association with him ; that the time has not yet come for him to withdraw in full confidence that all will be well in our affairs without his mastership. Do you understand my meaning ? ”

“ I know well, mother,” he answered, “ that the value of his wisdom and experience is incalculable.”

“ I fear it is a hard task I set you, my son,” she continued. “ But if you look calmly on this side, you will see, the more you dwell upon it—as I do most clearly—that the loss of his master mind and hand will be a sore calamity ; do what you can to fill his place. It is a hard task, I fear ; but regard it as an act of pure renunciation, and then, it will become easy, aye, and even joyfully performed ; not less holy than the frantic self-tortures of our anchorets and hermits.

“ Nay,” she exclaimed, vehemently again, “ those who refuse to live nobly the life they have, are fit for no life ! Let each make holy that which he has and holds ! ”

“ Mother,” said her son, after a meditative pause, “ I will look into my heart—and then do the best I can.”

CHAPTER V

THE TALE OF THE CROW-KING

RÁDHIKA DEVI while conversing with her son in the little hall had not failed to notice the three youngest children moving restlessly about the court. First one, then another, then two together peeped round the corner of the arch, but withdrew quietly as they received no encouragement to approach. Then they gathered in a group under the opposite arcade in the glimmer of the lamplight, prattling and laughing together in an undertone, while they watched for their father to leave the grandmother free. When at last he stepped into the court, they ran to meet him, and the youngest, Lakshman, a sturdy boy of six, clambered on his father's shoulder and whispered in his ear, whether they might now go to granny.

"Come, children, come," called Rádika. "What are you all plotting there?"

Lakshman and his eight-year-old sister, Siyám Sundari, ran eagerly into the hall, followed at a walking pace by the elder, Tej Rám, a boy of ten, not unconscious of the dignity demanded of a pupil of the English school.

"Oh, granny dear," said the little girl, drawing close to the dame's side, "you remember what you promised to-night."

"The story about the Raven King, Kág Bhusand," added little Lakshman.

Then the schoolboy: "And it is so late, they are afraid you will cut it short."

"Well, children," replied their grandmother, laughing, "sit you down quickly. But I must break off when your grandfather comes home for his supper."

"Then I hope his business will keep him quite late," exclaimed the girl.

"What, you would rather he waited for his supper than you for the end of the story?" said the dame.

"Oh no, no!" answered the girl eagerly. "I did not mean that; but if he remains out late, we shall not miss him so much while we listen to the story."

"You cunning little wench with your pretty pleas!" exclaimed her grandmother. Then turning to the elder boy: "Where is your big brother, Gangua?"

"He has lessons to prepare for school," answered Tej Rám.

"And you?"

"Oh, I can do mine in the early morning."

"Then you may stay here with the little ones if you like, and listen to the wonderful tale."

The two younger children crouched down close to their grandmother, the schoolboy in front in the seat vacated by his father.

Then the grandmother began her story, speaking sometimes in a slow deliberate tone, sometimes chanting, sometimes reciting with animation, in a clear musical voice pleasant to the children's ears.

THE GRANDAM'S STORY

Listen then, children, to the strange story of the beautiful queen, Chandra Mani Devi, wife of the good King Kevala, and of their little daughter Sarada Mani. They lived a long time ago far from here in the city of Kosamba on the Jamna. If you went to the bank of the holy river where the city once stood, you would only see the ruins, a great mound of broken bricks in the midst of which there stands a stone pillar, fixed so deep in the ground that a strong man might dig down all day and all night for a hundred days, and yet not uncover its base. But in the days of the good King Kevala it was a great city built along the Jamna cliff, with many busy markets and beautiful houses of the nobles and bankers and merchants. It was surrounded by gardens, where grew all kinds of sweet flowers and delicious fruits, and, most choice of all, the amrúd

or guavas, larger and more juicy and of more delicate flavour than any that grew then or have been grown since in all the land of Hind. And hence it was that Kosamba was known as the Delightful City of the Sweet Guavas.

Now on the landward side of the most beautiful of these gardens stood the King's Palace, fronted by an arcade decorated with paintings showing all the deeds of Ráma and Síta, and of Krishna, the Divine spring of joy, and the Gopis. Therein, too, were carved figures set with precious stones, which in the moonlight shot forth shafts of light, red and blue and yellow and green and orange.

From this royal garden down to the river-bed stone steps were built, and when the water was low, they led to a spit of white beach running out into the gentle stream—a beach of myriads of shells, shaped like the cowry and conch, but so tiny that a hundred and more would lie in the hollow of Sundaria's little hand without filling it.

[" But stay, you know my necklace of beaded shells ? Well, Sundaria, do you run to the cedar-wood chest—it is unlocked—and on the right you will find an ebony box inlaid with brass wire—you remember, your father brought it from Mainpuri as a present for me ; fetch it, and I will show you the shells."

The girl ran to the great chest and returned proudly bearing the jewel-box, which her grandmother unlocked to take out the coils of a necklace of minute shells threaded on fine silken cords. She hung it round the girl's neck, and the shells shone like pearls against her smooth brown neck and breast.]

Well, this beautiful garden with its terrace was enclosed in the private square of the palace, so that the queen and her ladies could walk there at will, and gather flowers and fruit free from intruders. Now one clear still evening in the month of Baisákh the queen and her little daughter wandered together to the terrace over the river. The three days' moon, shining low in the west beyond the stream, was reflected from the ripples in endless flying flakes of silver light, and the shelly

beach stretched white between, like the snow I have often told you about, which drifts around the shrine at Badrináth, far away yonder in the great mountains.

And the queen with her dear Sarada Mani stood watching the play of the ripples and the rays of the moon, while the gentle breeze from the west hardly rustled a fold of their muslin garments.

As they stood thus in silence side by side, they heard the flutter and beat of innumerable wings, and wild geese flying low over the water passed on their way up stream to the north ; myriads they seemed, so great was the flock, all bound for the holy Manasárowár lake, which, as our scholar Tijua knows, lies in the wide plain beyond the Abode of Snows.

Then said little Sarada Mani, hearing the ceaseless cackle of the birds on the wing : " Mother, shall we creep down to the shell-beach and sit there quite still, so the geese will fly close over us, and you are so wise perhaps you will tell me what they chatter one to another as they pass."

And when her daughter spoke, the queen also longed to sit on the edge of the white beach in the midst of the sparkling stream and listen to the rustle of the thousand wings and the chatter of the passing birds.

" Come then, little daughter," she said. " Above and below the watchmen keep guard against intruders under the cliff."

Noiselessly, hand in hand, they went down the steps, over the sand to the shell-beach stretching into the midst of the stream. There wrapped in the white *sáris* they crouched side by side like white rocks on the edge of the rippling river.

At first the flight of the birds swerved aside to avoid them, but little by little returned to mid-stream close over their heads, and they were fanned with the wings and heard the low whisper of restless tongues. Pressed together mother and daughter sat silent and motionless in the flood of moonlight by the glittering stream listening and watching in a delightful half-dream.

Now when the flock had become less dense with frequent intervals in the line, there came two birds alone side by side, and as they approached the beach they exchanged loud cries,

shot together downwards and alighted close to the queen and her little daughter, who, though they trembled and hardly breathed, remained as still as rocks.

Then it was a strange thing happened. Mother and daughter both heard the birds conversing, in low voices of sweetest tone—quite unlike the cackle of the goose, but like that of children whispering one to other as they lie side by side in bed. It was no foreign tongue they spoke, nor the native speech of the listeners, and still the words seemed familiar to them as their mother tongue, understood at once without effort.

And this is what they heard them say :

“ You are tired, little sister ; rest awhile.”

“ But they fly onward, all our brothers, and leave us here alone.”

“ I will stand beside you. Sit you while I watch.”

“ The moon will sink, and then how shall we follow on our brothers’ track ? ”

“ When the darkness gathers they will settle. We shall hear their flapping, splashing as they feed along the bank.”

“ You shall guide me, dearest sister, for you have travelled oft this way.”

“ Aye, well I know this islet and the castle on the cliff.”

“ But in such castles lurk the bowmen.”

“ None will shoot a shaft to strike us in this abode of peace. The King and Queen are gentle folk and wardens of the birds.”

“ Of hawks and kites and crows and eagles ? ”

“ Aye, all can dwell here unmolested, each to live as nature bids.”

“ Oh, happy birds ! ”

“ And ever watchful giving warning when evils gather round the King.”

“ Aye, everywhere the crow can listen.”

“ The soaring kite sees all approaching.”

“ And bids the crow his warning note to croak.”

“ On the right or on the left, before, behind, above, as good or evil omen to the quick awareness of the King.”

“ Oh, happy Queen, whose lord is guarded thus ! ”

"They have spun a web of love about them, surest guard for happiness.—But, hark! that croaking yonder from the cliff! 'Tis like a note of warning to some one near by us."

"Oh, sister, perhaps to us!"

"No friend to us the crow is. Hist! he flutters quickly with his wings, and hops and croaks again, sending here across the water warning of some evil near! Let us fly, my little sister. Behold, the moon has set!"

Then the two birds flapped from off the beach and flew up stream after the flock;—and the Queen and her daughter crouched together in close embrace.

"Oh, mother," whispered the girl, "did you hear what they said?"

"What was it, little daughter?"

"That the birds are watchful for our welfare because we have always dealt kindly with them."

"Yes, I heard that too."

"And they said the croaking of that crow was a warning of evil coming upon some one near them."

"Then surely upon us," exclaimed the Queen. "None else is here. Come quickly home, little daughter!"

She stood up, and holding the girl by the arm, looked round. But the last rays of the sunken moon reflected from a little cloud hanging over the western horizon, vanished, and darkness fell. A haze now filled the river valley, the cliff was hidden; and the Queen could distinguish nothing but the white shell-beach on which she stood.

She turned to follow the white track to the steps of the terrace—but suddenly, in front of her, she heard the shells crunched under a heavy tread, and held back, her heart throbbing with terror. Nothing was visible through the mist, but she heard clearly the steps of some heavy beast advancing along the narrow beach, barring the way. The girl clung closely to her in silent fear.

"Crouch down behind me, little daughter," whispered the Queen, and pushing the girl behind her she sat down on the edge of the stream, facing the unknown terror.

The heavy steps moved on stealthily towards them, and the

Queen became aware of a rank smell as of fetid breath. Her limbs were bathed in sweat, and she trembled like a pipal leaf, but thrust out her arms in front to protect her child.

Then from the far side of the stream came a rush and flutter of wings, brushing the Queen's head with the wind of their flight, and close in front, the angry croaking of crows, the flapping and beating of wings; then a low savage growl, hoarse barks, and the crunching of the beach under heavy feet retreating towards the cliff.

Then the ears of the Queen and her little daughter were again opened to apprehension; the croaking, and growls and barks became fraught with meaning, and this is what she heard:

"Get you back, you foul intruder! Dare you enter my domain?"

"Who are you, you sharp-beaked dæmon, to baulk me of my prey?"

"The Crow King, I, Kág Bhusand; and twenty more my trusty guards are with me. We will pluck your eyes and pick your brain."

"Oh, pardon, great Kág Bhusand! I but followed on the scent of goose flesh."

"The geese have flown, you silly hunter. All gone upwards to the swamp and reedy margins, where they graze all through the night. Away, away, and quickly! And know, that up stream lies a carcase for hyæna's hungry maw."

"I go, I go, Kág Bhusand. So grant me pardon for intrusion on the royal ground you guard."

Then all was silent, and the Queen once more heard the gentle ripple of the stream.

"Oh, little daughter," she whispered, "but for the King of the Crows we had perished under the hyæna's jaws!"

"Let us hasten home," whispered the girl.

"I dare not move," replied her mother. "I fear the great beast is lurking under the cliff. One snap of his teeth breaks a woman's leg."

"Then call for help. Yonder by the castle the sentinel will hear us."

"I dare not. None must know we left the gardens ; your father would be very wroth."

The Queen stood up and listening looked around, but in the dense mist nothing was visible, even the white beach was indistinguishable from the water. Moreover, in her terror she had lost all sense of the direction from which they came.

"Then, mother," whispered her daughter, "shall we beg for help again from the King Kág Bhusand ?"

And thereupon the Queen chanted in a low voice : "Oh, great Kág Bhusand, lord of Crowland, we stand here lost and helpless ; come and aid us once again !"

But no response came back, for Kág Bhusand had flown to the great tree near the palace, where his queen waited at home impatient for his return.

And while Queen Chandra Mani stood clasping her little daughter to her side and listened, wings brushed her hood passing over noiseless as a shadow, and she heard the hollow call of the Night-jar. It seemed to settle not far off, and repeated its melancholy cry—tyook ! tyook ! tyook ! like the rattle of a pebble on a muffled drum. Then there followed the cry of the Kuráil or Screech Owl hovering above them.

"Alas, the Screech Owl, the Bad Bird, what ill does he forbode ?" exclaimed the Queen, and clasping one another mother and daughter listened intently. Then again the cries of the birds reached their souls filled with meaning as words learnt in childhood, and this is what they heard them say :

"How fare you, Master Screech Owl ?"

"My heart is filled with anguish."

"What has happened to disturb you ?"

"I will tell you, good Sir Night-Jar. A rat, fed fat on butter, I brought home for my young ones—alack the evil day ! My nest was wrecked and rifled, and all my young ones gone ! 'Twas the cruel Crow King's doing ! Call blighting curses on him, and on the heads of all his kindred, ruthless ravening ravens ; all fell Kág Bhusand's brood !"

"Know you where he dwells, the greedy tyrant ?"

"Aye, well I know his homestead, on the tamarind tree out yonder, near the palace of Kevala, king of men. And count-

less crows there do his bidding, and guard from all intruders the inmost leafage where he dallies with his queen."

"By craft alone can he be smitten."

"What way of vengeance dost thou counsel?"

"A way quite sure and easy; and now the time for action. In the darkness we have sight unfailing, and noiseless wings to fly."

"True, O little Night-jar, birds of night are we!"

"On the castle-terrace, ready to the hands of skilful slingers, lie balls of moulded metal."

"Often have I hunted round them for mice and lizards lurking in the hollows of the heap."

"This is then my scheme for vengeance. Bring your wife and all your brethren; let each then seize a bullet and soar above the tree, where sits the fell Kág Bhusand close beside his queen and nestlings. Then shower the iron hail upon them, break their wings and kill their nestlings, so they perish from the world they sully with their crimes."

"Oh, crafty little Night-jar, whence learnt you these devices?"

"Watching men I learnt them."

"I go, and swiftly will I gather all my people. Sweet vengeance shall be mine."

The voices ceased, and again the Queen felt on her face the wind of the noiseless wings.

"Oh, mother!" whispered little Sarada Mani, "what a wicked plot to murder the nestlings of our friend the Crow King!"

"The good Kág Bhusand," added the Queen. "For years and years untold he has kept guard on that ancient tamarind, and none approach our palace without a warning from his watchers. We must save them from these night-plotting villains."

Her eagerness to protect her friend banished her fears, and she became brave of heart and alert of brain. Listening intently she heard the night-jar call again from the left. She thought: "The owl flew from right to left and returned from left to right. And now on the left the night-jar sits, and where

he sits comfortably calling can be no hyæna lurking near ; and surely on the left, the bank and steps."

Then she took off her shoes and holding her little daughter by the hand felt her way with naked feet over the shells to the sand under the cliff, and ascended the steps to the terrace with a wildly beating heart.

There all was dark and still and silent, wrapped in dense mist. While she stood on the terrace hesitating, she felt the wind from noiseless wings ; large birds one after another seemed flying over her. She thought, these are surely owls that fly in darkness. They go to lift the bullets in their talons and dash them down on Kág Bhusand's nest ; and then she heard the rattling of metal moved on metal.

"Come, little daughter," she whispered. "We will go to the pile of iron bullets and scare away the owls."

Then, heedless of the prickly grass-stems beneath her naked feet, she found the little platform where the balls were piled, and there she heard distinctly the chatter of the owls.

"Away, away, you wicked owls !" she cried, but in a low voice, swinging the end of her veiling-sheet. "We will pluck every feather from your wings !"

Bullets rattled upon the pile, and startled birds fluttered upwards. They had come just in time to save the crow's nest from the iron hail ! The clash of the falling bullets aroused the crows on the great tree ; warning calls sounded from the branches and the flapping of wings.

Then the Queen whispered to her daughter : "The crafty owls will watch us go, and return to wreak their vengeance !"

Then alert of wit, her little daughter said : "Throw my sári over the heap, and the owls will be scared and baffled."

"O most wise little daughter," replied the Queen, and taking from the child her only garment she covered the bullets, tucking the edges under the lowest layer.

"At dawn," said the Queen, "our faithful Piári Dási shall fetch the sári, and that old heap shall be moved beyond reach of those wicked owls. Come, let us now steal home."

She felt her way with naked feet to the paved path to the palace, and at last they saw the glimmering lamp under the

porch, where the good old nurse Piári Dási sat awaiting their return, oblivious of the passing hours, recalling the days long gone by when she was young and loved. No word or sign of surprise escaped the old nurse when she beheld the Queen come out of the darkness leading the naked little daughter by her side. She silently took the lamp and went before them up the narrow staircase to their chambers.

And thus then it happened, children, that the call, to return help for help received, drove fear from the heart of timid women, and sharpened their wits to find the needful way. Good-will bred good-will ; and the nestlings of the Crow King, Kág Bhusand, were saved from the attack of the Screech Owls.

CHAPTER VI

FATHER AND SON

WHILE Rádhika Devi was telling the story, the master of the house, Premnáth, came home. Entering the private apartments quietly, he saw the children gathered round their grandmother, but unwilling to interrupt, took a seat in the shadow until the story came to an end ; and he was borne back in memory to the days when he too had crouched at his grandmother's knees a listener to a tale of wonder as his grandchildren listened now. He was again the child of those days when the sweetness of life is complete.

But when the music of the voice ceased, the spell was broken, and the thought flashed upon him : " The Web of Illusion is cast about every man in the form most alluring to his heart. He who would know the Truth and live for it and be saved, shall rend the beautiful Web, and the greater the sacrifice, the greater the requital."

But his little granddaughter, Siyám Sundari, caught sight of him, and running out drew him into the hall, where he became one of the group, encouraging the children to talk of the story, and repeat in many tones the pretty names of the queen and her little daughter—Chandra Mani and Sarada Mani. The thoughts of Eternal Things upon which his mind had been brooding, were banished, and he was once more entangled in the Web of Illusion.

Too soon, it seemed to him, the Lady Rádhika dismissed the children and retired to the kitchen to prepare his supper. Meantime Premnáth washed and prayed and sat in meditation awaiting her call. He thought : " These dear children, their sweet voices and merry laughter excite a desire to live through

again a life such as theirs ; cunning spells to lure the heart from renunciation and the path of Salvation ! ”

Then broke in the call to supper, and his wife set before him the savoury pumpkin curry, the rice ripened by five years in her storehouse, and the crisp cakes just touched with asa-fœtida. Over the steam of his favourite dishes his nostrils expanded, and with a complacent smile he took his seat on the clay-washed floor of the dining-hall, his wife near him gently swaying a palm-leaf fan. Watching his appreciation of the little feast, she chatted quietly of the household, the children, the events of the day, speaking no word that might jar upon his restful mood. And when he had finished his meal and washed, she drew from him an account of the business which had detained him late on the bench of Honorary Magistrates.

“ Surely,” she said, “ our Rulers should be grateful to you for the time and trouble you expend in vindicating justice and defeating knavery. No pang is so sharp as that suffered by the victim of a false charge. Surely your persistence in checking this abomination is more worthy and holy than the most lavish scattering of alms.”

Premnáth was well pleased with the words. He appreciated highly his dignity as a local justice, and the power of frustrating many a cunning plot. At the back of his mind there arose vaguely the thought : “ This, too, I shall abandon with regret.”

But he said only : “ I think our Rulers set some value on my services. But, now I keep you from your supper. Do you take it now while I go to talk with Dwárkánáth.”

Then having put a white skull-cap on his head, he went into the outer courtyard, where he found his son seated alone smoking a *hukka*.

The moon shone brightly, filling the spacious quadrangle with light ; the air was so still that no leaf of the holy fig-tree was moved. From an adjoining house there came the music of a *vina* played with skill and the sound of a

man's voice singing softly but with distinct articulation of the words.

Dwárkánáth at once put aside the tobacco-pipe, for his father was no smoker and objected to the habit.

"That must be our new Bengali postmaster playing and singing," remarked Premnáth.

"Yes, Bábu Rám Kishan Dás," replied his son. "The soft Bengali words are well suited for music and song."

They listened in silence until the song and music ceased.

"You know something of Bengali," said Premnáth. "Can you catch the meaning?"

"Somewhat; I gathered fragments," replied his son. "He sang of children on the shore of the ocean playing with shells and sand; for them the waves ripple only in laughter; those false waves which wreck the great ships sailing the fair surface."

"The music is sweet and plaintive, and close wedded to the words," said Premnáth. "Perhaps you could invite him here some evening. I know your mother would delight to hear him sing to his *vina*."

"I will cultivate his acquaintance," replied his son.

"It is a pretty subject for a lyric," said Premnáth thoughtfully; "happy children charmed by the rippling laughter which masks the ruthless sea of life. And it is well. But when experience strips the veil of illusion, then is revealed the way to reality, and if piety move the heart to follow that way, it is well."

Then the son, mindful of his promise to his mother, took up the cue:

"Yes, it is well, if indeed pure piety be the motive to renunciation. But it is not so, if the spirit wearied and weak mistake for piety a craving for rest, hiding a sick heart under a pious cloak."

"That is true," replied his father. "It is written: he who withdraws from an active life, because it is irksome, shall not gather the fruit of renunciation." He paused, and then resumed in a graver tone: "But, if a New Light shine within the mind, and show that the dearest family ties are illusory,

and the occupations fondly pursued are vain—mere allurements from the path leading to Blessedness—and, moreover, reveal clearly the true way, that of Renunciation ;—then if a man, accepting this inner revelation, abandon all worldly things, he acts in a spirit of pure piety. And further, the perfection of his piety and his spiritual merit will be measured by the intensity of his love for the world of action which he abandons, and the agony he endures in renouncing it.”

The weighty words and earnest tone left no doubt in the young man’s mind that his father was expressing an opinion long deliberated. He replied : “ I think, father, that you have lately meditated much on these questions ? ”

After some hesitation, his father answered : “ Why should I not speak now—although my decision is not yet ripe—for if taken it must affect your future very seriously ? Yes, I have thought much on this doctrine lately.

“ It is true, as you know well, I have been happy in my daily task : it has always been, and is even now, the natural channel of my life. Difficulties I have encountered cheerfully as they arose, confident in my abilities, even enjoying the contest. And as I look back on the past, I acknowledge that my days have been blessed here in our home, with your mother, with my children, and now with the third generation arising.”

He paused, and his son added meditatively, rather following the train of his own thoughts : “ Truly, if a man love his life and, nevertheless, abandon it, he performs a great sacrifice.”

His father assented, nodding his head, and continued : “ But for some months my desire has been growing more urgent, to devote my remaining years to religious meditation.

“ Yes, I have thought much of that great doctrine, that material things, and not least our seemingly most holy attachments, are but illusions, which corrupt the pure spirit and hold it bound in the circle of life and death, until they are dissolved as mists veiling the truth, through the Light of the

Knowledge of Reality. And the Sages teach that the way to Enlightenment is through extinction of all desire, the renunciation of our earthly loves, and complete self-abnegation ; and that the final end is eternal bliss in union with the eternal self-existing Being, which is Brahman. Myriad ages may we live before this Insight is vouchsafed to us, but whenever the desire to attain it springs in the heart, it must be obeyed.

"Thus then it is, my son. Such doctrines, and others kindred to these, have occupied my mind of late, and now I am moved to pursue my studies and meditations in complete freedom from worldly affairs in a life of pious seclusion."

Dwárkánáth perceived that even had he been disposed to dispute the worth of the doctrines which influenced his father, it would be vain to do so, and would perhaps even strengthen his purpose to retire to meditate on their import. But ever mindful of his mother's admonition and wish, he shifted the discussion to the practical results likely to follow his father's resolution to abandon all participation in the business of the firm.

"Then, father, as I understand," he said, after a long pause, "if your action is to be determined by these principles, you will relinquish your duties, both public and private, and the care of all of us who have looked to you for guidance and help."

Premnáth acquiesced silently, and his son continued : "But before taking this serious step, I would urge, with all due deference, you must consider whether there are not in your family, and perhaps elsewhere, living souls for whose welfare your care and guidance is still imperatively needed. And I dare affirm, that you have deliberately incurred obligations, which you are bound to fulfil before you can righteously take the course which you are contemplating."

"You mean obligations so sacred that they may not be cast off even for the salvation of the soul ? "

"I know not," replied his son. "And yet, if these obligations are sacred, then to neglect them cannot be righteous. But let me quote the words of The Song of the Blessed One—

words you know well. It is written, He who does his Duty in his allotted sphere commits thereby no sin. Even though this Duty of Nature be tainted with Evil, he shall not abandon it. In doing this Duty he worships in Act Him from whom all things proceed."

"I know the words, my son, and respect them," replied Premnáth. "But now I deem my duty is complete, and I pass onward to a higher stage."

"Not so, father," replied Dwárkánáth. "So long as your active guidance and control is needed for our welfare, the duty is not complete."

"It is complete," returned his father, "because I leave you here fully competent to act in my place; you, and your son hereafter, and the youth Bál gobind, your nephew. I have reared you to succeed to my place in the firm and in the family; and now, at length, I may pass on to you the obligations which have lain upon me; I would claim release, that I may enter upon the last austere way which leads to eternal bliss in the bosom of the Godhead."

"Father," replied Dwárkánáth, "I beg you to hear me; hear what, alas! I must confess. Believe me, if your guiding hand is withdrawn now, this fair edifice of credit and wealth and rich family life which your wisdom has erected, will crumble—perhaps even to utter ruin. You would leave me as the one support of the House, but—I feel I am not fitted to bear the burden!"

"You, you, with your mature years and experience—not fitted to succeed to my place!"

"I am not," answered the son, resolutely. "Listen to my confession. All my thoughts and desires, all my real interests are elsewhere. The tasks of the counting-house, the administration of the estate, the public duties demanded from the head of our house; all these are irksome to me, alien my real inclinations—aye, even hateful."

"Surely, surely, my son," said Premnáth gently, as his son paused, "surely this aversion must be a transitory phase—due to some indisposition or recent vexation."

"I think not, father," replied Dwárkánáth earnestly.

“ Had I suspected that, I would not have pained you by this confession. No, it is a frank recognition of imperious inclinations, which have become clear and definite during my recent absence from home. It is a sincere admission to myself of my own nature, that thus I am constituted and not otherwise.

“ But let me explain. I want you to understand not only to what I am strongly averse, but whither my predilections, my passionate predilections, tend. For not to the concerns of my home are my thoughts directed, nor my desires to my good wife and children. But the song and music of yon singer are more precious to me than gold ; the voice of that Pátar woman, her languishing dance—I saw her but once—haunt me constantly, and my heart aches to be with her. I long for the Diwáli feast and those days of unhindered gambling. The free talk and debate unrestrained, and the laughter amid the choice company I frequented in Calcutta, Patna, and Delhi—those social nights in the great cities—aye, and the ever-changing scenes of the great fairs, where the beauty of the women shines opened like the stars and moon at night ; even those strange orgies I joined with my friends in Bengal, the wild worshippers of Káli ; all these things entice me away, filling my heart with desires I can even now hardly control ; the yearning to escape from the dull life at home and the dreary round of my daily task, becomes at times so strong that I feel I must burst the bonds at whatever cost. And if I were left uncontrolled, I should inevitably yield to the vehement impulse.”

“ My son, my son, what strange infatuation is this ? ” exclaimed his father.

“ No infatuation,” replied Dwárkánáth ; “ it is the nature of my soul expanded now to maturity and knowing itself.

“ Thus I have spoken, father, without reserve, laying my very soul naked before you. And now, my father, this is my prayer : defer the execution of your purpose ; your control is needed to guard your house. The time may come when this infatuation will pass away, and then you will be free.”

Premnáth sat long in silent meditation before he asked :
 " Have you confessed these things to your mother ? "

" Never," he answered. " I speak only now under sudden compulsion, wishing to avert a calamity which I fear may befall this house if you abandon your control."

Then they sat over against one another in silence ; and the music and song of the minstrel in the neighbouring house again sounded clear in the still night, and listening Dwárkánáth gathered the meaning of the refrain :—

" Strong, too strong, are the bonds,
 Which my heart strains to breaking to burst !
 For freedom only I crave,
 But dare not hope to be free."

" Ahi, ahi ! " he murmured inaudibly. " What a spell in this music to draw me away ! "

When the music ceased his father spoke : " Enough, my son. I will ponder well on all you have said, and then do what seems best for thee, and for me, and above all for all our dear ones."

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Dwárkánáth left the conference with his father heated and disturbed ; the house oppressed him ; the trivial chatter of his wife would be intolerable. A recitation of the Scriptures to be given that night at Pandit Rám Prasád's offered a ready excuse for escape. Carrying a lantern he hurried away, met by the breeze blown free up the lane from the flooded river. He found the lights burning brilliantly in the Pandit's house, and a grave audience, including many women, assembled listening to a young doctor reading the Mahábhárata. So clear was his enunciation of the sonorous verses that, though his voice was not raised above the pitch of ordinary converse, every syllable was heard by the furthest listener. From time to time he broke off to expound the text in lucid words, as a master of his tongue, of phrase and subject.

Dwárkánáth sat through the night listening intently and was uplifted into a sphere of poetry and mystic wisdom. The gods, the sages, the heroes of the sublime poem, assumed in

his imagination visible, almost tangible forms ; he was in the presence of things eternal and divine, and all the creatures of daily life, and his household cares vanished as perishable things of trivial import. He returned home at dawn dazed by the spell of the poems recited, as a *sādhu* by the smoke of his hemp juice.

CHAPTER VII

THE WIDOW

IT was the afternoon hour, when the women rest from the long tasks of the morning. The widow Har Sundari had retired to the terraced roof, her favourite resort in this quiet interval. The clouds had passed away and from the blue vault of the July sky, the sun shone through the clear air in full intensity of light and heat, and shadows lay black with sharp edges amidst the glare. But the roof was sheltered by the thick foliage of the great trees in the west, and a breeze came fresh with scent of flowers and ripening fruit. On the upper branches doves perched gently cooing, undisturbed by the restless flock of *mainas* fluttering to and fro with ceaseless chatter.

The widow sate on a low cane stool in the angle of the parapet watching the movements of the birds, of the leaves in the breeze, and the play of sunshine and shadow. Her hands lay lightly interlaced in her lap; the hood of her veiling-sheet thrown back exposed her oval head with clipped hair, the sharp lines of her brows and nose and chin, the hollow cheeks, and the large lustrous eyes fringed with curved lashes.

A complete calm lay upon her soul; and like the surface of a placid lake, it reflected the scene before her. For a brief interval she experienced that rare contentment, when the soul reposes in the present, oblivious of the past, anticipating nothing of the future.

Now while she sate thus, hardly conscious of self, she was aroused by a gentle hand laid on her shoulder, and beheld her daughter-in-law Indráin, whose bright face blended almost

without disturbance in the scene she had been placidly contemplating. With a smile of welcome she pressed the hand against her cheek, fondling it as she had used to fondle the hand of her babe.

"Oh, mother," said Indráin gently, "I would not disturb your quiet——"

"Nay, little daughter, your presence is no disturbance," replied the widow, interrupting. She passed her arm around the slim neck and drew her to her side.

"If you were sleeping or meditating," continued Indráin, "I was bid not to disturb you. But you seemed watching the birds, listening to their chirp and chatter. See, the *baya* birds are weaving their nest!"

"How they dance around their nest!"

"I don't wonder," replied Indráin, laughing. "If you had seen how my babe laughed and crowed and flung out his little limbs, when I danced around him, and heard how his voice made sweet music with the jingling anklets."

"Well, if as they say, Shiva Máhádeo danced with joy when he saw the world he created, why not a little mother about her child?—But you come with some message?"

"Oh, I was forgetting it," exclaimed Indráin.

"Yes, from grandfather. He would come to talk with you, if the time be convenient."

"I will come to him."

"If you permit, he will come to you here."

"Then beg him to come. See, the shadow of the tree covers the roof, and the air is fresh and sweet. And bring yonder stool for him to sit here in the thickest shade."

Indráin spread a strip of carpet near the parapet, arranged the stool, and having bowed over her mother-in-law's feet, ran down the steep stairs to the courtyard. Then the widow drew her *sári* close to cover her head, and stood facing the little doorway, while the dappled shadows of the rustling leafage fell upon her, and her light garment fluttered gracefully around the slim form. On an adjacent bough a *koel*, undisturbed by her presence, sung in its flute-like whistle a song of triumphant life.

When the father of her lost husband drew near, she bowed low, murmuring her greeting in a voice and attitude of profound respect. He laid his hands upon her head, repeating in a low voice, "The mercy of our Lord Ráma alight upon thee," and took his seat, beckoning her to be seated.

"Little daughter," he said, "I hope I do not interrupt your hour of rest."

"Nay, I was idly watching the birds among the leaves."

"Ah, I see those weaver birds have completed their nest since I was last here."

"And on the bough above, see the doves are brooding. The old tree is full of happy creatures."

"They are companions of your solitary hours?"

"When I first sate here alone, I thought in anger: Pitiless creatures, revelling amid the misery of this house which protects them! But now, I think: Happy creatures that can spread rays of their own joyful hearts! Shall we not rather share in their happiness than infect them with our own sorrow?"

He smiled gently, pointing to the niche in the wall where stood the brass figure of the Infant Krishna decked with fresh flowers.

"You worship with love that Holy Child—sporting, laughing, playing, dancing ever."

"But at other times, in other moods, the dread Mother Káli, with surpassing power to help—or will to destroy."

"So it befalls, little daughter: each of the varied manifestations of the Divinity, adored by a different phase in the heart of the worshipper, Man. But for me perhaps now, most fitted Shiva the Sublime Anchorer."

The widow, sensitive to the slightest change, noticed the grave tone of the last words, and raised her penetrating eyes to his face to read their purport.

He continued, after a brief pause, reading the question in her expressive face: "Yes, my daughter, and this leads me to the subject on which I wish to speak. It is this: I deem, after no little thought and hesitation, that the time is near for me to withdraw from the world; and freed from its engrossing

cares, devote my remaining days to prayer and meditation and discipline."

He paused as though expecting some response. But she remained silent, awaiting further explanation of this unexpected announcement. He continued :

"I should then make over to your brother-in-law, Dwárkánáth, the rule of the home and of all my estate."

He paused again, but she did not venture to speak. He continued :

"Herein lurks the doubt which restrains me from following the call. The welfare of our house must then pass to the charge of a new master—and if he be not fit? Speak, my daughter; how do you read his character?"

"I, revered father!" she exclaimed in surprise. "I know not what to think of this sudden announcement. I have never thought of our house except with you and my mother-in-law as the centre of all."

"But listen," urged Premnáth. "If my son take my place and be such as I would think him, all will be as well as heretofore."

She shook her head, and then after a moment's thought, beginning to realise the import of this reference to her, she said: "You have then resolved to retire—whether wisely or not, I know not—but you have resolved to do so, if my brother-in-law can be trusted to succeed to your place?"

"That is so," he answered, and she continued, now at last grasping the position: "What reason then have you to doubt your son's competence? He is of mature age, midway on the path from birth to death. I know not wherein he has failed as a son, a husband, or father of fair children, nor have I heard that in trade or traffic with you and in your absence, he has shown any deficiency. Why then, I ask, this doubt of his fitness for the trust?"

"All this is as you say, and yet: He has followed the path made smooth for him, followed it from early habit as the easiest course, and under the present influence of his father and mother, whom he loves and reveres. And yet—Sundaria,

tell me. Before your keen eyes all the current of our house passes. You see all, mark all sitting somewhat apart. Tell me then, what does your own insight disclose of his nature? Have you noted any recent change in his ways?"

The widow remained silent, conscious now of a certain distrust of her brother-in-law, which she had never formulated in words or clearly realised. And she thought: some distrust has sprung in his father's heart, and he seeks confirmation. She hesitated to reply, and noting her hesitation, he said:

"I see, it is so. Some doubt as to his stability of character has arisen in your mind. Speak then, without reserve!"

"You set me a very difficult task," she replied. "If doubts have arisen in my mind, I have never defined them or even dwelt upon them."

"It is my wish that you should express in complete sincerity what you have felt."

"Then at your command, most honoured father, I speak." And she continued slowly, with difficulty finding words: "This then, I feel, that I do not know my brother-in-law, as I know all others of our family; that there may be in his nature some hidden force, whether of good or evil, which being unknown, excites uncertainty, doubt, and even vague dread."

"And now that I reflect more closely, I find this doubt has increased since his long visits to the East. He has become restless; he sits apart moodily; chants to himself scraps of songs; he goes to his friends, when formerly he would sit at home with wife and children. He becomes quickly excited and speaks with vehemence. Perhaps new interests, new inclinations with weariness of the old, may be gathering strength, and these and not the old habits may influence his future conduct—or, perhaps, I know not, his old habits may be restored. But if I may speak in a fanciful image—his restlessness and moodiness are like those of a caged bird in solitude when the springtime comes."

"That is all I can express in words, and it is so vague, that

but for your command, I would not have endeavoured to shape it in speech, even to myself."

"I thank thee, gentle daughter. I think thy heart is like one of those sensitive instruments they use now to forecast the weather—it marks impending change before a sign affects our coarser sense." And he arose to depart.

BOOK THE SECOND

DWÁRKA

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAY TO THE LAND'S END

BĀBU PREMNĀTH TIWĀRI and his wife, Rád'hika Devi, accompanied by their little retinue, departed from home on the morn of the new moon of Kártik, a day and hour determined as propitious by the family astrologer. They were to remain at Amritsar during Lakshmi's bright festival, the Diwáli, and thence proceed through Rajputána and Baroda to the Temple of the West at holy Dwárka on the Land's End. Thence their pilgrimage was to include the Temple of the South at Rameshwar Rám, and many cities and holy places on their way to the Temple of the Lord of the World at Puri on the margin of the Eastern sea.

Premnáth left Ronáhi without regret : he had become restless in his old surroundings ; and eager to take the first step on the new way. His beloved Rád'hika was with him ; where she was, there was his home, and the old family house an empty shell.

But the house was associated with the chief events and interests of Rád'hika's life : to her it was the most holy spot upon earth. It enclosed all her treasures and the dear ones of her daily care : the grandchildren and the young wife, Indráin, with the babe at her breast ; and her most trusted counsellor and associate, the widow of her eldest son. The pang of separation was keen ; and she feared that under the control of the wife of Dwárkánáth, an amiable but slothful

woman, the old orderly ways of the household would lapse into confusion.

But she had accepted the task she had undertaken as a task of love to be performed with a cheerful heart. She left the house with happy words, and her husband read on her face no signs of her hidden distress. Ere they arrived at Amritsar, she recovered her natural equanimity and alert interest in the events of each passing day. There the brilliant spectacle of the Diwáli Feast delighted her; and she was fascinated by the glories of the Golden Temple in the Lake of Immortality and by the motley crowd of pilgrims. Her interest in the new scenes grew warmer as she noted that these attracted Premnâth more than the discourses of theological doctors.

When they turned southward her heart was light, and she looked forward with pleasure to visiting the celebrated temples, cities and palaces on their way to the west coast. Travelling by easy stages on the railway they lingered at Delhi, Jaipur, Ajmir, Mount Abu and Baroda, and from there proceeded to Rájkot in the heart of Kathiawár.

From Rájkot Premnâth had arranged to march by road to the west coast, and a bullock chariot and country carts had been engaged for his party. The real discomforts of their pilgrimage now began. Thus far, after a short journey by rail, they had been received at each halting-place as honoured guests by correspondents of the bank, fellow caste-men and local notables. These amenities were now exchanged for slow progress in springless vehicles, and rough quarters in little towns and villages or in camp under scanty groves, exposed to the squalls of wind and rain which swept inland from the ocean.

This long march presented few objects of interest and became day by day more irksome to Premnâth. He now reproached himself for having exposed his wife to much discomfort when, had he yielded to the advice of his friends at Rájkot, he might have taken the easy way by Porbandar and the sea to the Dwárka roadstead. But Rádika herself maintained her cheerfulness and spoke no word of complaint.

The last stage from Diolia to Dwárka, a long one through

a desolate land of stunted bushes and cactus, had become very wearisome, when at last they turned southward to the coast, and before them stretched the expanse of the sea. The long line of breakers rolled in solemn measure upon the rocks, and shot the white foam over the golden sand to their feet ; and the limitless waters sparkled, flecked with the crests raised by the fresh north wind. They prostrated themselves in reverence of the ocean wherein all the sacred rivers mingle their waters. Then in the distance they discerned the glittering spire of the Temple of Dwárka.

A mile further on the road they met their servants, Parkotam the priest, and Shio Diñ the cook with his wife, who had gone in advance to engage a suitable lodging in the town. Here they alighted to walk to the ford of the little river, Premnáth with the priest leading the way. But Rádika paused on the high ground above the holy confluence, looking on the ships and boats at anchor, on the emerald sea, and over the creek to the cliff, crowned by the temple and bordered on its skirts to the sea by innumerable monuments of pilgrims who had died blissfully on the sacred ground.

Her weariness was banished by the beauty of the scene, and she thought, " What gems are set on the face of the earth to reward us for the toil of dreary roads ! Surely these are adorable, whether or not a deity sanctified them by his dwelling ; and they are of this world, which at least is ours. How shall we deem them to be snares to entice us away from things belonging to the pure spirit ? "

But Dibiya, the cook's wife, impatient of silence, broke in with a querulous tale of the dirt and inconvenience of the best lodging they could find, and of the cleaning and purifying which had been needed to render them fit for the lady and her lord.

Rádika gently chiding, said : " Good, Dibiya ; at last we see this glorious temple which arose from the depths of the crystal sea, and when we return home we shall remember only this Wonder of the World—all these vexing trifles will be quite forgotten."

Then they forded the shallow stream in the bullock chariot,

and passed through the town to their lodging beyond the precincts of the temple.

Premnáth with the priest went at once to bathe in the sea while daylight served, leaving Rádika sitting on a little platform in front of the house, looking seaward. On her left stood the great temple, and under the level rays of the sun, the stonework glittered with an emerald green; and before her, the long line of waves rolled gently curling over the golden beach. In the distance a steamer sending forth wreathes of smoke from her black funnel passed across the red disc of the sun which touched the horizon, transformed the waters to molten gold, and vanished like a falling sphere of fire. The light of life was swiftly changed to the still grey aspect of death, and darkness settled down upon the sea. But the evening star shone brilliant above the haze, reflected from the rippling surface in flakes of silver, and for a few moments the new moon was visible.

CHAPTER IX

THE PILGRIM WOMEN

THEY devoted the following day to the long and elaborate ceremonial required of pilgrims to the holy land of the Krishna Dwárkánáth. Fasting they bathed and prayed in the shallow water where the little river meets the sea ; they fed the fish which leap to take food from the hand ; the men's hair was shaved and their arms impressed by the priest with the seal of the god. Then followed the slow circumambulation of the temple, the adoration in the Holy of Holies and worship in the many minor shrines ;—and not till the third watch of the day were they free to return to break their fast.

Their lodgings, mean and scanty, at least afforded shade and quiet, refreshing after the glare and heat, dust and bustle of the long day. On the south side of the little quadrangle was a shed for cooking and dining, opposite this a deep veranda with screens for the women, and on the east an open shed for the men. Over the doorway, which opened to the setting sun and the ocean, was an upper chamber with venetian shutters, exposed to the breeze both from sea and land.

Premnáth moody and silent retired alone to this upper chamber while the meal was being prepared. His wife forbore to intrude upon him, well assured that in due time he would confide to her unasked the cause of his apparent depression. After the meal he left her at once, saying briefly he would repose in the upper chamber where he could overlook the sea and the roadstead. Then she took her meal, quietly musing not without anxiety over her husband's unwonted dejection.

A feeling of loneliness settled upon her, and to dissipate it

she called Dibiya, the cook's wife, and encouraged her garrulous tongue. The vegetables of Dwárka, she said, were of poor quality after those of their northern home, the mango pickle of excessive sourness; and so through the several ingredients of the meal. She was indignant at the behaviour of the bold-faced Brahman women from the south; they strutted with the gait of soldiers among the pilgrims, and, their heads uncovered, looked men in the face without sinking their eyes; in the holy precincts they bore themselves as though they were passing the booths of the fair, laughing and talking noisily.

Rádhika listened as a traveller weary after a long journey listens to the babble of a shady brook.

Then Mohani, the maidservant, joined them and took up the word:

"Those women, rude and indecent! They squared their elbows, pushing with their hips to get to the front, and crushed old and young. My sheet was dragged off and my head bared; but I will say that there was one decent girl among them. She saw my grey head and my distress, and though she laughed at my plight, she recovered the sheet, and jabbering in her strange tongue wrapped it round me again. Perhaps she thought I was like her grandam."

"Where did that happen?" asked Rádhika.

"That was at the doorway under the figure of our Lord Ganpati. What a crush there was to get inside! I never should have got through, but for the priest who made way for my lord and lady."

"You can have seen very little," said Dibiya. "You are too short and stout for a crowd."

"Oh, I saw the great hall well enough," replied Mohani. "Yes, gallery over gallery, with pillars more than I can count, upwards to the great dome, a big stone canopy. Wonderful! But, you know, they say that it arose from the sea at the word of Lord Krishna, our Saviour the Lord of Dwárka. And, indeed, how could our masons build such a mighty place? What think you, my lady?"

"As to that legend I know nothing," replied Rádhika.

"I would rather believe that the master-builder was inspired by our Lord; and that he also guided the masons' hands to carve and lay the stones. Thus it comes that the form is indeed shaped by the Divine Spirit even as was the Book of Deeds of Ráma, which was written by the pen of Tulsi Dás."

"Aye, aye, mistress," exclaimed Dibiya with eager acquiescence. "We are but tools in the hands of the Lord when he chooses to guide us—and if he guide us not, we are quite lost."

"What then, Dibiya," replied her mistress with a smile. "You would have us like the marionettes which dance at the end of strings, and fall in a helpless heap when the player jerks no more."

"Ah, mistress," answered Dibiya complacently, "our Lord guides us so long as we worship and love him. And did we not travel all this long weary way to earn his grace?"

"I think we did, Dibiya."

"And the master knows and our good Pandit Parkotam the ways of salvation, and happy are we under their guidance."

"Very happy," added Rádhika, "when our trust is complete in those who lead us. But, tell me, Dibiya, all you saw and all you did to-day."

"Oh so many things," answered the loquacious woman. "For one thing, I sate on the lowest steps dabbling my feet in the water, and many other women sate there too. Then the little fishes nibbled my toes, ever so gently, and tickled me till I screamed and drew my feet out, and all the women did the same and laughed. We dropped parched grains upon the surface and the fish hustled together to swallow them as fast as they fell—fishes of all colours and some quite big. It was pretty to see them. But a child brought by one of the women fell into the water, and she screamed out helpless in terror. But I pulled the child out by the leg, and he spluttered and choked, his mouth full of sand and water. We beat him on the back and he coughed, and was sick and the fish struggled after his vomit. But I cried: 'See, nothing is wasted: the child feeds the holy fish before he can speak. Blessings on him!'"

“What did the child’s mother say ? ” asked Rád’hika.

“Oh, she chattered harshly in a strange tongue. But a polite young Brahman who had stood above watching us, explained my words to the mother, who then fell at my feet and blessed me for speaking such lucky words over her child. Then we washed the child and soothed him and he fell asleep on his mother’s lap, there on the sand where we were sitting. So I left them, as my husband called me away to go with him to the monuments of the four Pándava brothers, yonder by the stream. You know, mistress, that four of them passed away on this most holy spot, but the fifth and noblest vanished into heaven at the temple of our snows.”

“Yes, so it is related,” said Rád’hika. “The noble Yudhishthira and his faithful dog together. But, tell me further, good Dibiya, what did you see and think, when you stood in the Holy of Holies and offered flowers to the God ? ”

“Which one, mistress ? ” replied Dibiya. “I went to so many, they have got quite mixed up in my head.”

“Then how many shrines did you visit ? ” asked Rád’hika.

“Let me count,” replied Dibiya, holding up her fingers to tick them off. “First, then, there was Trimnáth ; then the Lord Krishna—Ranchor they called him ; then, ah yes, his holy mother, Devaki ; then Krishna Mádhua Ráe ; and then Sangam Naráyan ;—that is five. I told my husband I would go to every one, then I should be sure to worship at the most holy, whichever that was. I liked that of the Holy Mother best. And there are many others still to visit to-morrow.”

“Well, well,” interrupted Rád’hika. “But tell me why you liked Devaki’s shrine ? ”

“Oh, I could see the mother, and her holy child seemed to prattle in her arms. The crowd there was not so great, so I stood close by to make my offering. I thought to myself, she must know best the needs of us poor women, and all the tricks and naughty ways of our little ones ; was ever a child so full of mischief to worry his mother as her babe Krishna ? Yes, surely the Holy Mother knows best how to help us. Don’t you think I am right, mistress ? ”

“I am sure, Dibiya, none but the mother can really know

the mother's pangs and the mother's love." Then turning to Mohani, who sat at a respectful distance listening, open-mouthed, to the voluble chatter of the cook's wife: "But, Mohani, tell me what happened to you in the innermost cell, the Holy of Holies?"

"Oh, mistress," replied the woman, "I could see little. As Dibiya says, I am short and fat. And the light was so dim and the lurid smoke rolled above. But I saw the figure of the God, all red and gold it seemed, and the priests chanted in deep voices, the gongs rumbled and the bells rang. Strange sounds and incense filled the place, and thousands of faces seemed crowded about me. I was filled with dread and sweated till streams ran down my face and bosom. I would have thrown myself prostrate before the altar and the row of priests, but the crowd held me, and I could only bow my head before I was swept out through the passage into the open colonnade, and there at last I drew breath. And never do I wish to enter that cavern of dread again! But surely the God will care for us who have gone through so much to worship at his shrine.

"But when I recovered my breath and my senses, sitting in the corner of the great courtyard, I looked up at the great spire, and it seemed to be made up of hundreds of little temples, each complete, smaller and smaller upwards to the sky. I thought each must be the abode of a divine spirit.

"There I sat a long time watching the pilgrims as they passed through, each stopping to look upwards at the spire;—and I know not why, but I felt very happy. Perhaps I felt that the Awful One might care for a poor creature like me, and for my old man and our sons far away in the north on the banks of the Barei. It was only of them I thought while I bowed and prayed at the little shrine of our beloved Lord Krishna whom they call Ranchor."

The old Kahár woman bowed to the ground, holding her hands to her forehead. Then her mistress laid her hands gently on the bowed head, saying:

"You have your reward, good Mohani, since you were comforted by the Divine Influence from the shrine."

“And you, honoured mistress,” asked the old servant, “did not you too feel comforted?”

“Yes,” said Dibiya, encouraged by Rádika Devi’s condescension. “May we not hear what our honoured lady noted in the great temple and at the sacred meeting of the waters?”

“Ah, Dibiya,” answered Rádika, “I need time before the ferment will settle and my mind clear. But let me tell you one sight which moved me. When we came out into the courtyard from the little temple of Mádhu Ráe, we entered a dark passage in the corner, which led us out at the top of a steep flight of steps to the river. Far below lay the rocks and the sand red and gold of the beach, and the thousand little monuments, where people were moving to and fro, little as ants; and outward I looked over the plain of the sea, farther and farther to a curved line level with the eye, west and north and south. But behind us the land of Hind, and I felt that I stood on the very End of the Land;—all we love, all we care for and cherish left behind—and in front nothing but this lone waste of waters, without a mark or bound. Ah, I love my home and I love my life, and would not pass on to that vast and empty waste. So I turned shuddering from the edge of the precipice and went back to the sheltered court. Then I remembered, my lord had said, this temple of Dwárkánáth, this alone of all, faces the west and the sinking sun; and I said in my heart, this temple leads to the end and sinking of life, where men come as the noble Pándava brothers came, to pass away.”

“Oh, dear mistress!” exclaimed old Mohani. “What ill-boding thoughts were these! We came here for comfort, to gather fresh strength to live, not to perish away from our own dear house.”

But Dibiya said: “As for me, mistress, I was not a bit frightened when I came out of the dark tunnel. I went down the steps, and laughed when a kite flew close to my face and fluttered my hood. Oh, my head never turns giddy. I take plenty of good nourishing food! and I know that is the way to keep steady feet and a clear head.”

"Aye indeed, Dibiya," replied her mistress, laughing, "you have a strong stomach, and no trouble spoils your appetite."

"That is true, mistress. When I fast I am good for naught, and my temper as sharp as that sour mango pickle."

"Hush, hush," said Rádika. "I hear my lord coming."

The two servants drew their sheets over their heads and silently slipped away.

CHAPTER X

PREMNÁTH AT THE SHRINE

THE curtain of split bamboos hung between the arcades of the north veranda had been rolled up, and under the fresh breeze the little flames of the lamps flickered in the niches. The Lady Rádika, seated on the thick mat which covered the stone slabs of the floor, looked across the dim courtyard to the foot of the staircase leading to the upper chamber, expecting her husband to come down. The silence was broken by the tinkling of a bell from a neighbouring house, a homely sound she loved, the signal of pious family rites more holy in her esteem than the priestly ceremonies of the most sacred temple. Then her husband appeared, and stood in the middle of the yard as though musing, his shaven head bare, his shoulders wrapped in his cashmere shawl.

"Did you seek me, my lord? I am here," said Rádika, advancing to the edge of the veranda. He came to her at once and took a seat on a cane stool, while she bowing resumed her place on the mat by his side.

"To-night," he said, "a Dravidian Brahman is to recite from the Upanishads in the temple court."

"Are you not tired after the long day?" she asked.

"The refreshment and rest in that cool chamber have quite revived me," he replied. "Our pandit says the lecturer is reputed to be one gifted to illuminate obscurities."

"A night-long exposition and debate then, I presume?" remarked Rádika.

"Probably. The lecturer is a leading man in the school of the sage Rámanuja, whose doctrines, you know, are adopted by the priests of the temple."

"They are prudent to engage a preacher to support their own tenets," remarked his wife.

"Why prudent?"

"You remember what our host Pandit Shio Dín said, when you were talking together that first night in Jaipur?"

"He said many shrewd things. Few have such keen wits as that kinsman of ours. But what especially?"

"It was after the debate between the rival philosophers had closed. He remarked, 'These disputes are endless, and there is no final Court of Appeal to decide them. Practical men secure a convincing exposition of their own creed, and find therein sufficient comfort.'"

"Yes, I remember," he replied, laughing. "I answered him: 'But these contests of intellectual athletes are a choice diversion, into which the vulgar cannot intrude.'"

"Yes, and Shio Dín retorted: 'True—just like a game of chess, but inferior, as they always end in a stalemate.' So, my dear lord, so I would chime in with our wise kinsman—has not his wisdom raised him to the highest office under the Máharája?—let us attend to the doctors of our own philosopher, the sage Rámánand of the Pancha Gangá Ghát—and in any perplexity accept their guidance."

"But, my dear," he returned, "you know our philosopher was himself a disciple of the great Rámanuja."

"So I have heard—but with a difference. But you, my dear lord, know these things—not I. This only I know, that in prayer and service to the Holy Ones is comfort for the heart, and I find it best, when I sit beside you in our home-chapel, and put ready to your hand the sacred images and vessels of worship, and listen while you repeat the hymns of morning, noon, and night."

"Dear wife," he said softly, "apart from you I feel the fervour of my devotion grows cold." Then drawing closer, he repeated the verses from the Mahábhárata:

'A wife is half the man, his most true friend;
his surest help to heaven. A sweet-voiced
wife, the companion, counsellor, and best
comfort through the waste of life.'

Ah, my beloved, I know it well."

After a brief silence, she asked : " Now that you are rested, will you not tell me of the manifold rites of the Lord of Dwárka ? Have you found comfort and enlightenment ? "

" I hardly know what to answer—and nothing briefly. But let me recall what I experienced, and explaining to you, I shall discern more clearly what, if anything, I have gained. First then, I wonder not that the Lord Krishna, departing from Brindaban, chose this fair region for his dwelling, and the site for his city of marvels. The hill and the cliffs and the rocks below on the golden sand, pierced by the waves to the water-meet, and over all, as a crown adorning the Godhead, the temple with all its glories ;—the spire of countless carven shrines raised to the heaven of Indra ; the great hall with columned galleries tier above tier to the mighty vault ;—all this, the temple and all that round it lies, has profoundly impressed my mind as manifesting the Divine Spirit more clearly than any place whereon it has been my lot to stand.

" Now when I had meditated awhile on these deep impressions of the outward sense, I went to the Meeting of the Waters, where the surf rolls in to mingle with the holy stream, to wash away the sins of life, this and of lives foregone. And as I bathed and recited the mystic syllables and the prayer, I sought to fix my mind on the holy name and the divine light which illumines the carnal heart ; but in vain ;—a vision of the temple on the cliff and of the sparkling sea stretched boundless below haunted me, vivid as the reality itself : only this, no glimmer of light revealed of the God to the heart, nothing but what I had looked on with the fleshly eye.

" I re-entered the Hall of Worshippers and passed through the antechamber into the very cell of the God, and stood before his symbol, red and yellow and blue through the flare of the lamps and incense smoke, and heard the deep chant of the praying priests reverberate from the vault. I fell prostrate before the Presence in vague awe of some immeasurable Power, potent to help or save—if so he willed, or to hold aloof, leaving me, if unaided, yet unharmed. Deeply moved I regained the fresh clear air, and the placid dome of the heavens. Then I thought in doubt. Has he passed me by as one unfit

to be helped on my way ? Not for one moment had I been conscious of the Divine Presence in my heart as a light to thought or influence to prayerful hope.

" And thus, dear wife, the rites complete, the prayers all offered, I came away perplexed, for no inner light revealed that I had moved the God to grace."

" Alas, then, my dear lord," said Rádika, " you found not the comfort you sought ? "

" There can be no doubt left in the heart wherein the grace of the Lord has alighted."

" What signs should reveal that the worship has been accepted ? "

" Surely," he answered, " a consciousness of increased strength, such as we know best in our tender years when we find refuge in the mother's arms. The spirit should rise buoyant with confidence in divine guidance on the path of righteousness, a feeling of surety that our feet will stray no more."

" And yet," said Rádika, " you were awestricken as you sank prostrate before the Presence ? "

" For the passing moment in the dim cell, under the influence of the solemn sounds and incense and lurid flames, all seeming to emanate from a Mysterious Power. But when once more I regained the glorious light of day and looked upwards to the calm blue vault of the sky, this vanished, even as a passed vision of the night, and I asked myself, What then do I bear away ? "

His wife remained silent a little while before she asked in a quiet tone of inquiry : " But if one entering on these ceremonies doubt the efficiency of the rites and the prayers or even be not sure of the presence of the Divine Power ? "

" All doubts would vanish before the manifest signs of Divine Grace," replied Premnáth with decision.

" But, consider with me, dear husband," she urged. " Consider whether under the conditions I would presuppose, there can be any hope of a manifestation. For assume that one enter on these sacred ceremonies, thinking secretly in his heart, I know not of a surety whether the Holy One abide at

all within this shrine ; I know not whether, if he be here, these rites and prayers and strange flames and smoke and awesome words, are fit to draw his Grace upon the worshipper ;—if doubting thus, he come to the Holy Place and shrine, then it would seem that all his worship is but an empty form. He brings with him no conviction of the Divine Presence ; his prayers are no expression of a burning faith ; his mind wanders, lacking any reality whereon to fix the thoughts, and his heart is cold while his lips recite the prayer. Thus his prostrations of reverence and offerings at the shrine, his full-mouthed prayers, are but an outward show, belying the emptiness within. If then the God be there indeed, and look into the heart of the worshipper, how shall he accept this mere mockery of belief and reverence and love ? Shall he not rather be justly wroth at this dissimulation ?

“ I think then, my dear lord, that divine grace in return for prayer will be granted only to those who are filled with an overpowering consciousness of the Divine Presence, as convincing as the consciousness of the world of sense itself ; as real as I am to thee and thou to me.”

When she ceased, Premnáth sate in silent meditation, resting one hand upon her shoulder.

“ I cannot gainsay what you urge, my beloved,” he replied. “ That the pilgrim shall enter the shrine with perfect faith in the God and the rites, and then only find comfort ; if, indeed, it seem fit to the God to grant it. But if a specious outer show of faith cover a doubting heart, then perchance the Presence of a wrathful God may be manifested, and sore affliction alight on the hypocrite.”

“ Nay, dear lord,” exclaimed Rádhika, “ I said not that. And I beg you speak no words of ill-omen ! ”

“ Nay, dear wife,” he replied. “ These are mere speculations. So much at least is certain, that the pilgrim at the shrine should approach untainted by the subtleties of theology. But enough—tell me now of yourself, how were you affected at the Adoration ? ”

“ Ah, my lord,” she answered, “ what shall I say but what you know already. In the holy place, rightly or wrongly, my

thoughts were of you. But my mother taught me when I sat at her feet ;—it is writ in the Scriptures that as a woman honours her husband, so shall she be exalted in heaven : apart from him no sacrifice avails her, no prayer or holy rite. My prayer was for thee : that light shine upon thee, and thy heart find the peace of full attainment. Holding thee in my heart I share all grace bestowed on thee.”

“ I know it, my beloved, this creed of thine,” he replied, pressing her to him. “ This pilgrimage was mine, not thine. And as for thy worship, I think thou wert most happy joining in those simple observances in Jaipur.”

“ That is true,” she replied. “ Ah, those were pleasant days we passed at our kinsman’s house. The ladies were gracious, and with them I shared the ceremonial of the full moon of Kártik. At eve we carried forth the image of the Lord Krishna and set it upon the altar in the court. There under the great moon we paced around in silent prayer, while the priests murmured their measured chants, and the air was filled with silver light and solemn sounds. Then, as in a happy dream, I saw the Divine Boy herding cattle in the pastures of Brindaban, and out from the shadow of the trees ran his beloved Rádhá. The chanting ceased, the vision vanished, but I was as one on whom had alighted Grace Divine !

“ But to-day, amidst the smoke and flare and threatening hymns and clanging bells—no vision of grace or insight was bestowed upon me : if on thee, then through thee it were mine.”

“ Aye, my love,” he replied, “ in this I read thy heart. Of the Lord Krishna, the Holy Child of Brindaban, fair as the full moon, spring of joy to the mother’s heart, sweetest symbol of the Well-Beloved—of him thy childish heart was full even from thy mother’s lap. To thee he is no less real than that which thou hast touched with feeling hand, seen with open eye.”

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Premnáth remained silent, meditating, leaning his brow upon his hand while he grasped her shoulder.

"Surely," he said at length, "there lies much grace in the heart of a loving woman, whence insight into things divine, whate'er our doctors teach in their dialectic pride !

"Consider now this with me : We spoke of consciousness of the divine grace, through the ineffable comfort which fills the heart with joy and peace. You say that none are thus moved but those for whom the Divinity is present at their prayers even as the encompassing world of sense. But creeds are without number, the imagination of man is unresting in the fabrication of visionary forms, and for each votary in his sincerity his own image of a Divine Being is complete and real."

"I understand," said Rádika after a pause, as he broke off. "How shall the votary know of a surety from his consciousness of divine grace after adoration, that the object of his worship really exists outside his own ardent imagination ? "

"Yes, that is my meaning : that the profound comfort and joyful bliss which rewards pure meditation on the Divine Name and sincere prayer, may spring as mere emotions from the mind itself, independently of any influence emanating from a Divine Being—even as warmth may follow quick movements of the limbs, no less than from the heat of burning fuel. Hence this spiritual experience can afford no ground for believing that the Deity addressed is a Reality in the scheme of existing things."

"Then," replied Rádika eagerly, "I would answer : The votary's conviction of the Presence of the Divinity he addresses is absolute ; it is as sure as his consciousness that the beloved is here by his side in the flesh. It is a direct perception which no cunning reasons can obliterate.

"But, my lord, my dear lord, by one in whose heart the doubts you suggest exist, the fruit of prayer cannot be gathered. None can glow with love and adoration before a Shape suspected to be a hollow mockery. The mere chill of doubt blights the prayer even as uttered.

"And as to what you said of the countless creeds and diverse rites—I would answer : The Divinity is manifested to the heart of man in many forms—forms which you have

called visionary—but each, I would urge, is fitted to the nature of the worshipper, under many names and diverse forms; *The One* revealed, and with him the pious heart communes in many ways. Or as I would rather frame my image—a thousand channels lead to the Ocean of Love, all open to the pious whose faith is firm in the Divine Influence; but to the impious none. Through Faith and Love all creeds lead to God.

“Thus, I would urge, that the worshipper absorbed in his adoration is assured of the Divine Presence as of his own living heart! no greater assurance is possible and none is needed. Even as the world of sense is revealed to the outer sight, so is the Divinity revealed to the inner eye. For Doubt there is no place.”

“None, surely none,” he said, pressing her to his side. “Thy woman’s insight pierces to the very root of the mystery, and beyond this, I think, the subtle reasonings of our most learned doctors cannot carry us. But as they teach that all this world of sense, our most assured reality, is but an Illusion—Maya only—then why not, too, this inner counterpart?”

“But enough, my beloved. Yonder I see our good Pandit Parkotam impatient to depart lest we should lose the prologue to the great recital.”

He pressed her hand to his cheek and departed.

CHAPTER XI

THE LITTLE PLAGUES OF A PILGRIM

THE Lady Rádika remained seated as her husband had left her, striving to control her beating heart and the rapid current of her thoughts excited by the discussion. She inserted her hand into the bag containing her rosary, and in a hardly audible murmur recited the Holy Name until every bead had passed between her fingers.

Her brain grew calm, and she began to comprehend her husband's mental attitude. Meditating on the mysteries of religion, he had become perplexed by many doubts, and wished to retire to a life of study and contemplation. But influenced by her persuasions and the uncertainty regarding his son's capacity, he had deferred his purpose and consented to undertake a prolonged pilgrimage. He had been turned aside from the path of intellectual investigation which he desired to follow, to prayer and adoration, which neither offered a solution of his speculative difficulties, nor in his present mood could afford any satisfaction to his heart. His theoretical scepticism had blighted in their first expansion the emotions which should have arisen from worship ;—as she herself had coarsely said—his worship had been a mere mockery of belief and reverence. This fact, the root whence sprung his consciousness of unaccepted prayer and sacrifice, she had in her eagerness to follow and explain his feelings, bluntly exposed to him. Then it was that a thought of awe had flashed upon both, foreseen by neither—that to the votary who dares to enter the shrine with a doubting heart and a mere outward show of Faith, the Presence of a God in Wrath may be manifested in sore affliction of his hypocrisy !

Her practical mind was not prone to dwell on evil omens,

and her reliance had ever been on the God of Love ; but now a vague dread crept into her heart ; and she remembered that the Temple faced west, to the dying day, to the sinking, not the rising of Life. Then the vague feeling took definite form as anxiety for her husband's welfare.

Calling the old servant Mohani to accompany her, she went out of the front door to the seat under the shed by the porch.

The night was dark but transparent : from the purple-black vault of the sky the stars shed living light constantly changing in colour, and just above the haze of the horizon the Planet shone, a sphere of pure and quiet light. Before her stretched the sea, dark and placid, studded by the lights of the ships in the roadstead. To the right the gleam from the lighthouse fell on the thin wisp of mist along shore and on the memorial column erected over a soldier's tomb. To the left the temple spire glistened, reflecting the lamps burning in the courtyard below. The rumble of a drum and tinkle of a bell in the town, a splash of oars, and the lap of the slow waves on the beach reached her ears ; all else was still.

Rádhika Devi sat in quiet contemplation of the scene, while beside her Mohani crouched motionless waiting until she was addressed. But when the Planet glowed red, and was lost in the haze, then Mohani broke the silence, asking timidly whether her mistress was in pain.

" Why should you think so ? " replied Rádhika, surprised.

" You drew a deep breath, and I heard a sob, a sigh, almost a groan."

" When the star vanished, and darkness seemed to close in upon me."

The old servant remained silent, too respectful to intrude. But after a little while, her mistress spoke :

" In truth, Mohani, I am anxious about my lord."

" I saw he came from the temple deep in thought," replied Mohani, " and his brow was wrinkled as with some worry."

" You noticed that, Mohani ? "

Then the old servant's tongue, long restrained, was loosened in voluble chatter.

" Yes, worried he looked—the master. And how, mistress,

should I not mark every change in his face ? I who for forty years have eaten salt in his house, and daily watched him. Yes, even from that day when I came to serve you with my first babe at my breast, when my husband brought his yoke to bear the master's panniers of clothes and *pán* and papers to Gujarpura, where the wheat lay to be shared out between lord and tiller. Ah, it seems but yestermorn, until I recall the many changes since. Ahi, ahi, my good husband gone his way at Mother Káli's call ; my sons gone afar in service, I know not where ; my little daughters wives and mothers in distant homesteads, and I left grey and alone—yet happy serving my lady, so not alone. Aye, aye, how should I not know every feature of my master—and not mark any change ? ”

“ Since when have you noticed a change ? ”

“ Since we left Rájkot, and were dragged over these com-fortless wastes. What wonder ? In the house of the Seth at Rájkot we were honoured guests and enjoyed all good things just as in our home in Ronáhi. What a cool shady place was that courtyard where stood rows of shrubs and flowers and holy basil in pots on the marble steps of the hall with carven pillars ! There my lord would sit with the Seth and his friends, and I heard his laughter frequent among them. A minstrel came and sang to the music of his *vina*, in the foreign tongue folk talk here, and it was sweet in sound and pleased my lord. He gave him presents, and was in merry mood.

“ One evening I heard the Seth trying to persuade him, saying : ‘ Why go the long rough track through wastes to holy Dwárka ? Take the rail south to the Harbour, and wait there for the steamer to the Dwárka roadstead. Or if you must march afoot, start from the Harbour by the coast road, open and fair, only four or five days to the Land's End. See,’ he said, ‘ I will write to the Rána there, a noble chief, my good patron, and he will entertain you with honour and speed you on the way.’ Then the Seth laughed and added : ‘ You must visit and admire the temple his royal mother built, and perhaps you might hint that the report of the beautiful building reached you in far Ronáhi.’

“ So spake the Seth, and his words seemed wise. But our

master (and he surely knows best) answered : ' We will look on the sea first as we approach the Land's End, where was the holy city of the Lord of Dwárka. The toil and discipline of the arduous road will purify our spirits to enter meekly into the Holy Land.'

" Thus he spake while I sat below the steps under the basil shrub—unheeded. Sure am I that the master is wise ; but the road grew very irksome to him, he became vexed and irritable. Ah, what a miserable night was that when the storm wind blew down from the north, beating through the scanty trees and bushes, and when we crouched in any shelter, it veered round and beat again full upon us. Turn where I would it beat on my face. An ill-starred place surely, where squalls blow from all quarters at once.

" No wonder the master was vexed and anxious about my mistress, though indeed the toils of the road may bring blessings to the pilgrim. When I saw his glum face at the dawn I thought of him bright and cheerful with the Seth in the great hall, and wondered whether he regretted that good advice for an easier road had been unheeded. Drenched and chilled and coughing all of us; —even for you, dear mistress, we could find but scanty shelter under the chariot hood against the tearing rain and wind ! And ever since that dreadful night, you have been husky in the throat !

" Well, well, we are not so young as we were to bear discomforts and be cheerful, and if the promised blessings of the Holy Ones of Dwárka are not granted to the master and all with him—I will say we have paid the price, and the promised goods should have been delivered."

Her mistress listened to the garrulous record of the tribulations on the road, willing to be distracted from her dejection.

CHAPTER XII

THE DASNÁMI FRIAR

RÁDHIKA was about to reply, encouraging the old servant to continue her chatter, when close by she heard a deep-drawn sigh, and some murmured words, which repeated seemed to articulate : " Ahi, ahi, sweet voices from the fair land of Katahr." And turning sharply to the right she discerned crouched below the platform, a figure with head resting on hands which clasped a staff. Mohani startled arose to her feet, but her mistress without moving demanded sharply : " Who art thou, lurking in earshot ? "

The intruder raised his head slowly, and a soft voice answered in her own dialect : " Lady, sweet is the tongue of those who dwell in the fair land of Katahr, far in the north under the holy peaks of Himáchal. Ahi, ahi, it touches the heart of the exile."

" Who art thou that hidden in the shadow dost listen and sigh ? "

" Lady," replied the gentle voice, " passing I heard the country speech of my boyhood and manhood, and hearing I stopped to listen, each word music in my ears. I seemed once more at my home on the Rám-ganga stream, crouched as a boy under the eaves at night, listening to the dear voices of those who reared me—so long ago ! "

Then was Rádhi-ka moved by his words, and said in a kindly tone : " Come forward then, old man, here into the light and show your face."

The crouched figure without rising moved to the front of the platform. " At your bidding, lady," he said, and looked up at her. The lantern held up by Mohani showed a lean old face close shaven, with nose and chin almost meeting over a

toothless mouth. Bushy white eyebrows shaded the eyes, which glittered full of life between lids bare of lashes. A scanty turban of ochre-dyed cotton was tied round his head, and he wore a narrow sheet of the same colour cast like a little cape over his shoulders.

While the two women scrutinised him he sate motionless, with his bright eyes fixed on Rádhika's face exposed under her loosely-hooded sheet.

"I came not creeping to catch the purport of your talk, lady," he said, in the same quiet voice. "But I was drawn by the sound of my old country speech, best spoken by the tongues of our women."

"Whence come you, old man?" asked Rádhika, "and whither are you going?"

"From near by and I go not far," he replied. "I move within narrow limits. I dwell one of the Brethren, yonder in the Sarada Math—one of the holy brotherhood devoted to Sankar Acháryá the Saint. A Dásnámi I. And whence, lady, come you?"

"From Ronáhi——"

"Aye, Ronáhi on the Barei River," interrupted the old monk. "Well, I knew it once—how long ago I cannot tell. A rich town ringed about with great mango groves, and fertile fields of cane and wheat and rice and millet. Wealthy merchants and bankers filled the markets with traffic, and day and night their loaded wains passed north and south, blocking the roads. Doth it still stand fair and rich as then?"

"Even as then," answered Rádhika. "The trade and wealth no less, but grown, I judge."

"What noble temple has newly risen to the gods we worship to vie with those they build here in this holy land, Sauráshtra?"

Rádhika shook her head. "Some little shrines only, of brick and plaster."

"Alas then, now as in the past our merchants devote none of their gathered wealth to the greater glory of their divinities—and still the great mosque of Islám towers over all the town?"

"So it is, father," replied Rád'hika. "And of the mosque, too, the copings fall, the minarets crack, and of the people of Islám none cares."

"Ah, a godless folk all, methinks."

"Nay, reverend father, not all. Among us are many pious men and women. But rather in our own homes than at distant temples we erect our Holy of Holies, and in our daily worship and meditation we are conscious that the Divine Presence is near our own hearth-fire. Nay, I think our hearts are not less moved to piety than those of the founders of these great abodes of the Gods—here in Sauráshtra."

"Well said, my daughter," returned the monk. "If there be no piety around the hearth, there will be little abroad. And yet, the great temple of the God excites in many a new consciousness of the Present Deity."

"That may well be, father," she answered, "but my most holy thoughts spring in our own chapel among mine own kinsfolk. But tell me where was your home before the call to the Holy Brotherhood? A Brahman household bred you, for I have heard that from no other caste does your rule receive disciples."

"You are right, my daughter," he replied. "I broke the sacred cord in twain when I took the vow of a Dásnámi monk and the name of Rám Dás Tirthá. And yet, why should I not recall those days long past? I seek not to live them again: desire is dead."

"Even though your heart grew warm hearing the voices from your native land?"

"As in a calm night," he answered, "I listen to the lapping of the waves on the beach, and to the breeze of the dawn bearing the glad voices of awakened birds. Nay, my daughter, I seek nothing, need nothing, neither loving nor hating, I await meekly the day of release. Surely I know that all that has been, all that is, and all that shall be—all is the revelation of the Divinity; all I feel, joys and sorrows, health and sickness—all are forms of The One mirrored in my mind; that *I am He*, even as each ripple and wave of yonder stream is a phase of one great whole.

" But the many entangled in the maze of Illusion deem that the God is one, the World another, and man distinct from both. They look on the world as a pool of sin into which the pure spirit of God and of Man is plunged in corruption ; they teach that God through desire created and sustains the world ; that man is held fast therein by the bonds of his fleshly life.

" But to us truth has been revealed and has delivered us from these baneful illusions. We know that in the mind of man the Divinity becomes aware of himself, his own nature and the All which He Is. And when this supreme truth is manifest in all minds, then shall all the myriad forms of the Divinity be revealed to Him and the cycle of Divine Action being completed in self-revelation, shall vanish in Non-Being."

The old monk paused after this recital of his mystic creed, looking meditatively in Rádhika's face. As he remained silent, she spoke :

" Father, if I may speak on such profound doctrines, I would urge : To whom these are as you say *revealed*, by him they may be comprehended. But addressed by word of mouth to the unenlightened mind they bear no distinct meaning. Maybe if one ponder through the silences of the night, and meditate when the mind is clearest in the holy hour of the grey dawning, ever seeking to encompass the mystery, these doctrines would lie bare ; then, perhaps, as a flash of light to the inner sense their import might be as you say, *revealed*, and stand firm in the mind as a revelation of truth. Thus only, it seems, can they be comprehended and accepted. Is not that so ? "

" It is true, my daughter," he replied, " only to those who can withdraw from all outer sense of being and sink into the extreme depths of meditation are these doctrines revealed as truth."

" How then shall they be known to the many ? " returned Rádhika. " But to pass from this mystery, answer me on this practical point : Since you and the Divinity are recognisably One, whither is your prayer directed ? "

" Prayer, my daughter," he answered, with slow solemnity ;

“ true prayer consists not in asking gifts of grace nor in imploring deliverance from evil, but in the perfect consciousness of the identity of self with the Divinity. This is pure adoration stripped of every particle of Desire. When I pray, I cross my hand on my bosom and repeat *I am he.*”

She shook her head : “ In our sore distress and helplessness, we seek Divine aid, and assured of his Power and goodwill, we find therein our greatest comfort.”

“ So it is,” he answered, “ with those who are not of the holy brotherhood of those to whom truth is revealed.”

Rádhika remained silent awhile, and then reverting to her former request, she said : “ May I now, reverend father, remind you that you said you could without sin recall the time when you too lived as one of the profane who are encompassed by the darkness, or at best, the twilight of error. I would know in what household you were reared and where in our beloved Katahr.”

The monk answered, a quiet smile lighting up his lean face : “ Lady, you have listened to words of mystery not without intelligence of their first bearings ; and this may perhaps hereafter lead you to the shrine of truth itself. But, woman-like, you care more for the teacher’s worldly path before he reached the Light. Listen, then.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE FRIAR'S HISTORY : THE HAVEN OF EARTHLY GOOD

"**A**T no great distance from your home on the Barei, I was reared, at Sardárnagar, overlooking the ford and floating-bridge of the Rám-ganga River. There day and night, in endless succession, the creaking wains pass, bearing rice and sugar and wheat and borax and pepper from your rich markets in the north. As a boy, I loved to loiter about the wagoners at their camping ground below our house on the high bank or on the low ground over-stream at Chaubári ; and to run to and fro across the swaying planks of the bridge, free from the bridgeman's toll. And thus I heard much talk of your fair town and the countryside.

" My father, the pandit, had his house near the edge of the cliff and ministered as priest through the villages of the upland which men call Balia——"

He broke off suddenly, and addressing Mohani, who sat behind her mistress, said : " If your honoured lady permits, tell me the name of the gentleman your master, and his father's name."

Rádhika signed permission and Mohani answered : " The honoured name of my master is Bábu Premnáth Tiwári, son of Jánkináth. And who, I would ask, that dwells in the region where you were born and bred has not heard of the bankers of Ronáhi ? "

The monk raised his right hand to his forehead respectfully. " Lady, I remember well the name of Bábu Jánkináth of Ronáhi : one renowned throughout Katahr for his piety, wealth, and generous alms. Not far to the east of my old

home is the village of Chilaura, of which the Bábu Sáhib was *zamindár*.

“And now, honoured lady, I can speak freely addressing the mistress of the house my father held in great respect, and to whose people in Chilaura we ministered as priests.

“My father took me as a boy on his rounds among his many parishioners, and aiding him I learnt all the ceremonial of our priestcraft. At home from morning to noon, I recited the texts after my father, and learnt all he had to teach, hymns, rites, and rules of astrology. But as I grew to manhood this occupation became more and more irksome to me. The holy chants were trite from constant repetition. I recited them with rapidly moving lips while my thoughts were far away pursuing alien phantoms, and I began to feel contempt for the solemn rites and artifices of our ancient profession. I wished to engage in some work in the thronging world, where practical things are done. But I concealed this from my father, for I could not incur his displeasure, and more, I shrank from causing him pain. He had never thought I could cherish any other wish than to follow in his steps—the way of his fathers from generation to generation. Such a purpose would have seemed to him an incredible impiety.

“But to remain in the old routine was impossible for me, so I begged him to permit me to depart to study under a renowned teacher who had recently settled in holy Soron. But in my secret heart I had determined that if the student’s life did not suit me, I would abandon it.

“Now my father was then aged and a widower, and the only inmates of our house besides ourselves were the widow of my father’s brother, old and sickly, and my wife with our only living child at her breast. Thus there was no man to take my place.

“Nevertheless, my father consented to let me go for the sake of learning, stipulating only that I should study at some neighbouring place within reach of a summons, for he said : ‘I am old, and thou only art left to perform the funeral rites.’ But my wife pleaded, ‘Leave me not here alone. Thou art a householder, and the bond to thy wife and home cannot be

broken without sin.' And I answered: 'Remain here, to help my good aunt to maintain our home and care for my father. I go only to Soron, and will return on frequent visits.'

"Now in those days a pandit, renowned through all our country for his learning, had established a college in Soron by the holy pool. And when I came before him to be admitted as a student, he searched my heart. I said: 'Venerable master, I come seeking knowledge only.' But he questioned me, and discerned that my thirst for knowledge was assumed as a pretext to escape from a dreary routine; that I was restless to move away, not drawn to him as a teacher. He taxed me with the sin, and I knew all subterfuge was vain. So I pleaded: 'Master, I have come where the pure fount of knowledge flows, and drinking thereof I shall learn its worth. I confess my sin and bow before your lotus feet and submit myself absolutely to your rules.' He then admitted me, and I began a new life as a disciple.

"He ruled over us, some five-and-twenty students, with severity, demanding the utmost from each, saying, 'Thou art come to learn. Thou shalt obey me implicitly in all things. None but earnest and holy students remain in my school.'

"I stood in awe of him as a master by right and venerated him as learned and wise and pure.

"A task, a rite, a prayer, a practice, was fixed for every hour of the day and night—an iron routine from which no deviation was permitted. If one failed to conform, he was driven forth relentlessly. We who remained accepted his rule with a whole heart, even as the rule of God; for verily, through the master the Divine Spirit passes to the scholar.

"Under this discipline a great calm slowly settled upon me. I forgot the world outside our sacred guild, and my one desire became to surpass my fellow-students in the esteem of my venerable master. When my father visited me, bringing news of my wife and child, I cared not for them, and was sore that he broke into the set practice of my day.

"Thus passed the months until the fatal night of the full moon of Bhádon, when the waters of the Burhganga lapped the highest step of the *ghát*. I had bathed and prayed and

then tarried in meditation, and the ripples at my feet sparkling in the moonlight drew my thoughts to the outer world and I stood watching the silvered stream until the ringing of a temple bell aroused me as from a trance. I became conscious of the sin of wandering thoughts and turned hastily away. The first streak of dawn shone above the temple lane. A band of women coming down to the *ghát* met me ; and hurrying on heedlessly, I passed through in the midst of them, brushed by the garments of one on the right. Then I heard a little laugh soft and clear as the tinkle of a silver bell, and for an instant I stood still with quickly throbbing heart. And the women with downcast heads passed onwards to the *ghát*.

“ Until I hurriedly reached the shelter of my hut I recited the *gayatri* without pause, but in vain ; the desire surged up irrepressible to see the lips whence the tinkling laugh had come—such a laugh as might have sprung from the dancing ripples I had watched on the silvered stream. Surely, I thought, those lips, that face, are fair as the moonlit water. And throughout my strenuous study of the morning this thought lay hid, ready to spring into consciousness at each pause in my task.

“ Now many pilgrims had come to the holy river and the shrines of Sukara-Kshetra, and passed our huts beside the sacred pool ; but I had never given heed to them : they were as a flock of green pigeons flitting by ;—aye, even as the fallen leaves of the nim trees drifting in the wind of Chait : the grain parcher comes to sweep them into his basket and burns them in his oven ;—they are gone !

“ And not far from our huts stands an old nim tree, shading a little platform where the pilgrim women are wont to cluster to be near the well at the Temple of Máhádeo. There they sit chatting together, and the begging friars hang about them, bestowing blessings and receiving alms.

“ Now when the first watch of the day came full, and my morning task was complete, my eyes wandered to this group beneath the old tree—and as a porpoise uprises from the depth of the stream, a thought surged up in my mind : perhaps there I may hear a voice speak with the tone of the silvery laugh—

and hardly conscious of my acts, I went towards the group of women, and passed by slowly with eyes fixed on the ground as in profound meditation, but listening with strained ears. Then amidst the many voices, I heard clearly these verses recited :—

' Ácche din páchhe gae, Har se kyo na het,
Ab pachtáe kyá hot hai, jab chiriyán chug gáin khet.'

' In the days long passed you refused
Your heart to Hari to yield ;
How vain are regrets when the birds
Have stripped all the grain from the field.'

I stood still, my eyes fixed on the ground, and at once I heard the ring of the silvery laugh, and a sweet voice recited :—

'Bura jo dekhán main chali, burá na dekhá koe ;
Jo dil knojá ápná, to mujh si buri na koe.'

' On no sinner my eyes could alight
When seeking for one all around ;
Then alone I looked in my heart
And the greatest of sinners I found.'

" I looked quickly towards the voice and saw the speaker, her hood loose about her face, and for an instant eyes full of laughter met mine, and then the face was covered from sight.

" Ahi, ahi, two women sitting side by side exchanging couplets of Kabír ;—that was all ! But at the tinkle of the laugh, the tones of the voice and the shaft of light from the eyes, my heart had stood still, then again throbbed wildly. Shame fell upon me ; I dared not look nor remain, and returned with slow feet to my hut, repeating under my breath as a prayer, the words of Kabír :—

' Never ceases the note of the flute
And the song is of love.'

And as I crouched down hiding my face I spoke in my heart. Kámadeo drew his shaft upon Máhádeo, and was forthwith withered by the fire of the Divinity's glance. Would I could have blasted thee too ! That destroyer of my peace had perished ; now she lives to trouble me !—Ah, fool, thou poor wight of little wit, hadst thou but sunk thine eyes before her and mumbled a blessing, she had looked up and spoken !

“ Thus I sate swayed to and fro in thought, drawn forward and driven back as a straw floating between wind and stream, yet slowly moving downward with the current.

“ The hour to prepare for the midday meal came—and passed unheeded : my comrades saw me lost in meditation on the Holy Name, and respectfully held apart.

“ But when the third watch of the day came, the sky darkened with clouds, from the eaves rain splashed on my feet—and I was aroused from my trance, and knew it was the hour to attend on the Master. But I shrank from appearing before him. Then one of our scholars came, saying : ‘ The Master asks if thou art sick ? ’ I answered, I was lost in thought, and meekly followed into the presence. But immediately the words had passed my lips, I was ashamed, for my words were false, intending to imply my thought had been of holy things, when I had been brooding over profanities. Truth only, or utter silence, beseems the scholar of divine words.

“ Thus, when I came before the Master he read confusion on my shamefast countenance, and when twilight, the time of peace, fell, he dismissed the scholars, but bade me light the lamp in his little chamber ; and when I had lit the flame and bowed and repeated the prayer, and set the lamp on the pedestal by his right side, he spoke, bidding me bring the book of *The Song of the Blessed One*. He opened the leaves at the chapter of the Two-fold Path, and pointing to a text bade me read and interpret.

“ These were the words : ‘ Though a man restrain his limbs, yet if his thoughts dwell on the objects of sense, he is deluded and a hypocrite.’

“ The Master said : ‘ Thou hast construed rightly. Now expound the text.’

“ Then after painful meditation I answered :

“ ‘ The words apply to those who having submitted themselves to the holy rule of Renunciation, nevertheless indulge in profane thoughts. As to these, the Blessed One declared to Arjun : if the sinner believe that by his outward show of self-control he deceives God, or that his Master will not see through

this shell of holiness to the sin within—then he is a deluded fool, unfitted for the sacred path. If, on the other hand, knowing that his inward sin cannot be hidden from God or his Master, he persists, nevertheless, in bearing the cloak of holiness, then he is a hypocrite, and if, moreover, he think to escape penalty in hell, he is a deluded fool.

“ ‘ In either case he is a liar in act, profaning the holy path on which he has entered.’ ”

“ Then my Master answered, saying : ‘ You have rightly expanded the divine words. Now listen to me, my son. During the morning recitation you stumbled in your words, and when I looked at you, your eye was shifty, avoiding mine. And when you came not with the others in the afternoon, it was reported that you sate lost in thought and had not taken your midday meal. The scholar I sent to call you reported that you had excused your remissness, saying : ‘ I was lost in thought.’ ”

“ ‘ My son, look me now in the face, and answer : What hath troubled thy mind, and what was the subject of thy deep meditation ? ’ ”

“ Then I sank down at the Master's feet and wept, and said : ‘ I am neither deluded nor am I a hypocrite : I confess.’ And straightway I told all that had befallen me, even as I have told you, noble lady.

“ Then the Master sate long in silence meditating with eyes fixed upon me, and I waited in sore trouble for his words. Thus at last he delivered his judgment—final, irrevocable :

“ ‘ My son, thy heart readily taketh an impression, but hath not the firmness of texture needed to retain it. Things holy, things profane ; things spiritual, things sensual ; things eternal of the soul, things illusory of the body ; all pass over thy heart, each impressing a fleeting image. And thy mind hath no clear understanding of their utter discordance. Thou art indeed as one who cannot discriminate between the primal light of the sun and the wan reflected light of the moon.

“ ‘ For such as thou art, my son, there is no help here. Vainly would one lead the blind man into the light that he may see the holy lotus afloat on the lake.

“ ‘ Return then to thy house and to thy wife, to dwell there like thy father before thee, as a ministering priest. Well fitted art thou to guide peasants in rites and prayers, and bring comfort to simple folk. For, my son, thy heart is simple and thou art sincere.

“ ‘ Leave me—for now my hour for meditation has come.’

“ So I humbly bowed over his feet and left him.

“ The rain-storm had passed over, and the moon shone clear amidst the flying clouds. I slung my blanket and bundle over my staff, and straightway departed. Moved by the strong spirit of the Master, I yielded in complete acquiescence, dimly feeling, I think, that left to my own will I should have sunk into sin.

“ Through the night I walked without pause, and ere dawn I arrived at my home, and sank down on the doorstep—agitation, distress, fasting, ceaseless movement, had exhausted me. There my wife coming out in the grey light found me senseless as in death.

“ She nursed me as only a loving wife can nurse, and after some days I recovered my strength. Then it was that my heart turned to her, and I found man’s greatest treasure in this transient life—a true, wise, and loving wife.

“ How profound was the discernment of the Master who bade me return to this secure haven ! ”

CHAPTER XIV

THE SAME CONTINUED : THE END OF ILLUSION

THE old friar ceased speaking, and as he looked up to Rádhika the lamplight fell upon his face, revealing a brighter gleam in his eyes and fresh life on his wrinkled features.

Then Rádhika : " This I would further learn from you, reverend father : You are now even as a departed spirit, rehearsing in full consciousness the course of his earthly life, comprehending the bliss and sorrow, the good and evil, and knowing all the inner life of the heart. Tell me then, if it rested with you freely to choose, is there any phase of your life which you would will to live through again—aye, and yet again, eternally repeated ? "

He meditated awhile, endeavouring to grasp clearly the purport of her question, and then answered : " Lady, the course of life is as a chain, each event linked with necessity to that which precedes and follows : none can be repeated without that which preceded and followed. Yet all, from beginning to end, an illusion—a disease of the spirit."

" Nay, good father," she replied, " you evade my question. Whether or not the events of life be a really existing experience of a world other than self, or but a product of the thinking mind, yet for the sentient being the feeling of bliss and misery, of good and evil are most real, if the only reality ; and each phase for the period of its presence the one existing reality—and this whether or not it be linked of necessity to what preceded and followed. Answer me then, from your own simple heart, freed from all doctrine of profound doctors : was there no phase in your life which, now looking back, you would desire to repeat even to all eternity ? "

"My daughter," he answered slowly. "Thy heart is pure, thy mind sincere, and thou hast pondered these things well. To thee can I answer, and surely: Yes, those days which followed my return home, alas, all too brief! I see them now as days of purest happiness; of good done and no evil willed. And the light and guide that shone upon them and led my spirit, was my beloved wife, and with her, our children around us—I dare confess to thee, my daughter—though it seem a sin of desire—I would live those days again and again repeated to all eternity."

"I thank you, reverend father," said Rádika. "In such yearning there can be no sin—whatever the celibate doctors may find in their solitary brooding! I say it with a surety of truth in my heart."

"And in thy words, my daughter," he said, "there may be inspiration not less worthy of credence than the abstruse reasoning of our renowned teachers."

Then after a pause, Rádika inquired further: "Tell me how that happy period of your life came to an end? Did the fabric of happiness crumble away or was it crushed in calamity? How came you to join the brotherhood of lonely men? May I not hear this in completion of your history?"

"Why not, noble lady?" he replied, "for you are one who hears me with a clear understanding, guided by a sympathetic heart. Listen then, how those days of light and happiness—alas, how brief!—were followed by darkness and distress."

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The old monk, resting his face on his knees, remained silent some time before he continued his history:

"Lady, soul differs from soul, and the flesh of one is not as the flesh of another; and hence the phase of life which brings content to the one, is shunned by another. To the Rájput warrior, the days under arms for death or victory; for the hunter, the pursuit of his quarry; for the vengeful man, the encompassing of requital; for the eager student, the days and nights of study and thought, the widening knowledge and the

deepening insight into hidden things ;—for each, then, according to the humour of his body and soul. But for me the centre of content was the sacred hearth-fire, and clustered around it, my wife and children ; and I valued all else as it maintained the fire, and the unfailing love.

“ Thus for each is there some special form of the Illusion of Life which beguiles him from the path of salvation—drawing him with irresistible force to cling to the vain vision of life. Blessed, then, is the ruthless hand which destroys this visionary joy and permits him to discern reality. This which we call evil is the awakening of the spirit to the fundamental error of Life itself and to the only way of escape.

“ All bliss is the beguiling of the spirit ; through suffering is the gate of salvation opened : to the eternal rest in which only is bliss.

“ And now, noble lady, I will tell you how I was snatched out of the web of illusion in which I was so completely entangled.

“ For eight years peace and happiness were ours : passing clouds but enhanced the brightness of our sky.

“ My father died ;—soon after, his sister, who had dwelt with us as a mother from our childhood. When the due rites had been performed and the days of grief were passed, we found the harmony of our home more complete, for we two and our two children formed the rounded circle of our common life : the departed had been no segment of this our sphere of contentment ; and we who remained were drawn closer together.

“ The round of my ministrations through the villages continued unbroken : birth, marriage, death ; rites of sowing and harvest ; forecasts of auspicious days and seasons ; all the spiritual guidance of our village folk ; the sacred ceremonies of these, the great events of their lives, filled my days. And merry feastings and gatherings led me hither and thither. I carried round and brought home all the news and gossip of the countryside ; and, listening, my wife would laugh, aye, and sometimes weep at a tale of misery—and slip in many a shrewd remark on the ways of our village folk. I loved to

relate, and she to listen ; and each bit of news, merry tale or sad story, I garnered for her ears.

“ Ah, lady, those years of quiet happiness ! And such, too, have been passed by countless households of our people, since long peace and security have come upon the fair land of Katahr ; our life notable only among them that it was more complete around the hearth and undisturbed by adversity from without.

“ But there came a change at last. A strange fever spread through our villages ; men, women and children were attacked ; they passed from raging heat to shivering cold ; sank down in weakness lower and lower, until the heart ceased to beat, and they passed insensibly away. Those who recovered wandered their daily round, phantoms of their former selves, impotent and sterile. Men said a blighting air had drifted down from the mountain-skirts and poisoned all our blood.

“ But we in our household were confident in the protection of our household gods, and by constant prayers and sacred rites warded off the destroying fiend. Our hearts were buoyed up by our trust, although by our river the pyres burnt night and day and the wailing of women never ceased.”

He paused in his narrative, and Rádika said : “ I remember well the season of that deadly fever, though I was but a child-wife then. In Ronáhi we suffered little, but I recollect my lord said that in his village of Chilaura at least one of every ten strong men had died.”

The monk nodded assent, and continued : “ Amidst all the affliction our hearth-fire burnt bright and we lived secure around its glow—yes, until we thought the sickness had passed away. Then the blow fell. Our son sickened, a youth of twelve years, fair as Ráma or Lakshman. We nursed him, praying and sacrificing without pause ; but he grew weaker ; and then his sister was stricken, and they lay side by side sinking towards death. Then my wife said to me, piteously : ‘ Behold our prayers, our incense, all our holy rites avail nothing. Go thou to the Farangi Fort yonder : folk say the doctor there has drugs of great power to stay this disease. Pray him to come to us. We have gold and silver piled up here, and

will pay him all he asks, nay, all we have, if only he will save our children.' But when I heard her, I thought, the rain pours down in torrents, the river is in great flood, the bridge of boats long broken—how shall I cross? Or if I cross, how shall the doctor consent to come through here? And further, I thought, what shall his art avail when our Holy Ones will not let our children live? Thus I made excuses to my wife for not hurrying away across the stormy flood;—and thus another day of helpless watching passed. Then again my wife pressed me, urgently insisting; and I yielded, and crossed the great flood to the Farangi camp. The doctor listened patiently, and smiled at my offers of lavish fees, but he said: 'My coming will avail nothing now; they have sunk down in weakness, and my remedies will come too late. Nevertheless, take you these drugs, administer them, and treat the children as I direct.' So I returned quickly as I could; but when I approached our house I was met by the sound of wailing—both our children were dead.

"Now when the pyres had burnt out and the dear ashes mingled with the sacred stream, then my wife and I sate side by side in our desolate house. It was then she began to question me as to what I had spoken to the doctor and what he had said. And I told her all, word by word. Then she fell upon my shoulder weeping, and cried: 'Had you but gone when I first besought you, the medicine he gave and the treatment he ordered might have rescued our children from the grip of death.' I soothed her, saying, how should they have lived against the will of the Holy Ones?

"Now I had come back from my toilsome journey, weary and fasting and chilled with the beating rain;—and sank down exhausted. 'Surely,' said my wife, 'the fever will settle upon thee, wearied and fasting man.' And immediately she administered to me the powders I had brought, and gave me hot milk and strengthening food, exactly as the doctor had directed. On the fourth day I recovered, the fever completely subdued. And no charm or prayer or spell had she permitted to be recited over me.

"In the morning I sate in the sunshine musing sadly, when

my wife came hastily and standing before me, spoke these words : ‘ Master, surely the blight of sin has fallen on thee and me.’ Startled, I demanded what she meant by these dreadful words, and she answered in broken voice : ‘ Hadst thou gone swiftly, as I begged, to the doctor yonder across the river, our children had been saved, as thou thyself hast been saved ;—delivered from the pestilence by the drugs he gave. But, alas, no less sin is mine ; that having seen our prayers and potions of no avail, and knowing whence help could come, I did not drive thee forth on the right way. And now, the death of our son and the death of our daughter are upon thy head and mine.’ And having spoken thus, she sank down wailing and beating her breast.

“ In vain I strove by specious words to shake her fatal belief : she repeated,—ever more convinced each time she uttered the words : an inspiration of the Holy One had prompted her to seek alien help for the children ; she had failed to act thereon with all her heart ; and the penalty followed. In secret, I shared her belief.

“ Then brooding over this conviction of sin, she could no longer endure to look upon my face, saying always : ‘ Hadst thou gone forthwith as I bade, our children had been saved.’ Weak from the fever, I sate alone in misery, and thus some days passed. But on the fourth day, I remembered my wise Master who still dwelt by the holy pool in Soron, and I spoke to my wife saying : ‘ Come with me to the spring of wisdom and learning, and we will together consult the Master. There is none his equal in wisdom.’ She consented, saying : ‘ What matters whether I am here in this lonely house or yonder in Soron or on the way ? If it will comfort thee, let us go.’ Then I yoked my bullocks in the light cart, and taking all needed for her comfort, set forth under the full moon, long before dawn.

“ When the sun stood at the first watch of the day I drew up under that old nim tree where I had heard the voice and seen that vision. It was the hour when the scholars had dispersed after the morning class, and the Master was sitting alone under the shade of his awning. He recognised me as I

stood aloof bowing, with my wife behind me, and at once he bade me approach. Then I told him of the death of our children, and all that had passed between her and me ; that if her heart turned from me and she lived in misery, then was I too utterly undone ; rather would I choose she found happiness consorting with another than see her sit in despair with a heart in her bosom dead. And I begged him to hear from her own tongue all she had felt and thought, and then counsel us how we should live.

“ I withdrew apart while she sate in long conference with the Master, and hope was in my heart, for I knew the Master’s power and wisdom and goodwill. And when at last my wife beckoned to me to come, I took my seat by her side in front of the Master, who addressing her, commanded us, and in these words :

“ ‘ The flood was out, the rain falling, the road and ferry difficult and dangerous ; and faint was the hope that the Farangi Baid would leave his hospital at such a season to visit the children of a poor priest in a distant village. Thus thought thy husband, shrinking from the irksome and perilous journey ; but dwelling chiefly on the small chance of success to his request for help. And hence he was led astray, and failed to give due weight to the duty which lay urgent upon him, to adopt all means, however difficult, however remote, for saving the life of a son. His mind forged specious pretexts to justify the shrinking of his heart from the toil and danger to be incurred when there was little hope of successful issue. He delayed until he was driven away by thee, perforce—too late ! ’

“ Then turning to address me, the Master spoke : ‘ Had thy wife so willed, she had full power to compel thee to go. But, although she cherished great hope of help from the skill of the Farangi Baid, yet covertly she was reluctant to drive thee forth in the storm to cross the floods, and willingly accepted pretexts of delay. Hadst thou been a servant, she would have commanded thee to go ; but for thee her love was great. This was a mitigation of her fault, for the love of a wife is most holy.

“ ‘ And now both of you note this : Whether or not the swift

administration of the drugs would have saved the children ; and whether through them this man was cured, or would have equally recovered without them ;—this none can say. It is therefore unjust to lay the blame of the children's death as a sin upon this man on account of his delay. But note well, this in no way affects the guilt of you twain as I have laid it open before you. The purity of the soul must be determined by the motives which determine the act or omission—and not by the issue thereof.

“ ‘ And now, woman, I bid thee, say thus to thy husband : Had I firmly urged thy going, thou hadst gone forthwith. May my omission be forgiven, for it was due to my love of thee.

“ ‘ And thou, once my scholar, thou shalt confess to this good woman, thy wife : I know now that the reasons I offered for not doing thy bidding at once were pretexts only. But I have cherished thee with constant love and service, let not this fault be the undoing of our common life.

“ ‘ And thou, woman, since thy husband has acknowledged his error, care for him even as when he was sick, and his soul shall be healed as was his body. But if thou turn from him, he will perish and thy sin be beyond measure.

“ ‘ Enough ! And now do you go together to the holy Burhganga, and having bathed and performed the rites under this moon of Kártik, pray that sons and daughters may be born to you in place of those lost.’

“ The Master dismissed us. And when we were alone we fell into each other's arms and wept.

“ Thus was our common life renewed and the pain of our great loss soothed by our mutual comforting.”

CHAPTER XV

THE SAME CONCLUDED : THE DREAD WAY TO SPIRITUAL REST

THE monk ceasing to speak sate with bowed head. Then Rádika : " Reverend father, the Master read your hearts as an open book writ in fair legible characters. His counsel restored you to your home life. But this same life you now regard as a beguiling of the spirit from the true path. Tell me then, through what gate of farther suffering did you enter on the way of salvation ? "

He answered, after a long pause : " Aye, I entered on the way, and now, so near the goal, my heart will surely sustain me to reach it."

He remained silent some time before he resumed his history, speaking now in a low voice but with growing excitement :

" In the month of Jeth—six months have passed. It is mid-noon. I see one crouched down alone under the shed in his house-yard, and the hot blast of the west rushes over the roof, moaning through the tun tree. His dry staring eyes look into the empty chamber, where beside a little seat stands the spinning-wheel. No voice, no clink of anklets, all still within ; loneliness enclosed by four walls. Only the raging blast tears through the boughs of the tree stripping the leaves.

" The roar of the wind grows louder—sparks and smoke fly over the house ; there is a rush of trampling cattle through the lane, and the cry of Fire ! But the man sits dazed, even as a short while before he sate by the blazing pyre on the sand of the river. Flaming flakes fall upon the roof, sparks burn his flesh and the reek chokes him. At last, with the cry of a wild beast in terror, he springs to life, through the scorched door into the lane, from the cliff into the sand, and there by

the river sits naked under the burning wind driving the sand into his flesh. Then a black storm of dust brings darkness, thunder, and a torrent of rain.

"Through all I sate naked on the sand by the river.

"All had perished : children, and wife, and the hollow casket which had held my treasures ; vanished utterly, all !

"Thus was I delivered from the bondage of life, and my way opened on the path of salvation. And when the fit day and hour came round, shorn and purified, I broke the holy cord from my waist, and entered the peaceful and holy brotherhood of the Dásnámi friars."

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The old monk's excited features settled into repose ; his raised hands sank to his lap, and he sate still with downcast eyes lost in thought.

But after a little while Rádihika Devi aroused him, asking : "Tell me, reverend father, did you consult your Master before you abandoned the world ? "

He looked up, and slowly shook his head.

But she asked again : "Did you fear that he might forbid you, saying, Time and duties strictly fulfilled day by day will heal the sorest heart : there is much work for thee in the world yet, among thy parishioners who have so long relied on thy ministrations ? "

Again shaking his head, he answered : "He was a stern master. But know, lady, that as the widow craves to depart from the world on the funeral pyre of her lord, taking the Way of Purity ; so doth the pious heart of the sore and weary wayfarer seek refuge in the Holy Path."

Then Rádihika Devi remembered her own vision of bereavement and how she sought to escape from the pangs of grief by the Way of Purity, and she remained silent. At last, seeking further understanding, she asked : "In this retreat and devotion to Divine Things, you found solace from grief, and peace ? "

He answered : "Spiritual Devotion filled the place left vacant by Earthly Love, and brought me peace."

Meditating again, Rádika spoke : " May I ask one more question, reverend father ? This final peace which you have attained—is it a state you would choose as highest, above all the varied phases which make up your life in the world : joys and sorrows, pursuit and fruition, action and the sweetness of rest ;—above all those activities of life when the blood ran strong through your veins ? "

He answered, after pondering over the question, with his eyes fixed on her face :

" I know I am one with the God : in me is he manifested, now and in the past. My suffering was his, and my joy. All are but phases of the Divine Activity. But the ineffable peace can be known only by comparison with the toil and suffering and restless life of the past. Each stage was a progress to the state of holy peace I have now attained ; this was the culmination of the whole, and it was realised through Divine Knowledge ;—thus the goal and end and aim of all ; thus the best and highest attainable."

He arose slowly to his feet, and standing over her stretched out his hand and said : " And now, my daughter, may all blessing alight upon thee : the honour of the good man, thy lord ; the love of strong children ; and mayest thou be long preserved to rule thy household in the way of righteousness. Let all men pray to be blest by commune with a sympathising heart such as thou hast shown while I rehearsed the tale of my life in the world."

He refused the proffered alms, saying none of his brotherhood accepted them, and departed in the darkness on the road to the Sarada Math.

CHAPTER XVI

RÁDHKA'S MEDITATIONS

WHEN the monk departed Rádika Devi sate silent, looking seaward. The long slow waves broke with grave resonance on the shore, and murmuring and seething were drawn back into the deep ;—the only sounds in the still night. On the dark sea glimmered the faint reflection of the constellation of Orion and the dominant flame of the dog-star. The balmy air played gently upon the lady's face, and all around was peace.

But her mind was busy with the friar's history, and her growing irritation against him compelled her to break the silence. Turning to Mohani, she inquired what she thought of the friar's conduct.

" Ah, mistress," replied the old servant, " the man suffered sore afflictions, and sought comfort where only can it be surely found, in a holy life."

" But, bethink thee, Mohani," said Rádika ; " there was a wide circle of pious folk dependent on his ministry ; he was the welcome visitor bringing comfort and guidance to many scattered homes. All this good work, the duty of his life, he abandoned. He fled into seclusion as a man flees from a storm to the shelter of a roof ; I think he had no clear call to follow the friars' path. He but yielded to the stress of calamity, as an earthen dam to the flood : small merit to the dam ! I grant it is well that there are brotherhoods such as his to afford refuge to the broken spirit, overwhelmed by calamity. But those spirits rank as best and noblest, which rise up again from grief to pursue their task here on earth. Such a one we have in our own dear home, our noble Har Sundari : after the greatest calamity she uprose to fulfil the duties of her lot : the

care of her child, and of the other little ones of the house ; to nurse the sick and bring comfort in trouble : she, the most helpful of all our household. But that monk—a simple gentle creature—may his end be peace ! ”

Hardly had the words passed her lips when she remembered the appeal after her morning vision, and the answer returned by the saintly widow. She was overcome by a feeling of shame : she herself in the spirit had been guilty of the sin, and condemning the monk, she condemned herself.

Bidding Mohani remove the lamp, she remained long in silent contemplation, looking outward to the dim sea and the clear stars above.

She had hastily passed a severe judgment on the monk, who, yielding under accumulated storms of calamity, had abandoned his duty in the world—but was she fitted to judge, she who lacked both experience of the stress of the storm and insight into the spiritual refuge to which he had fled ?

Then she was softened to pity and thought : “ Profound misery fell upon me in a vision, and I sought to flee from life. On him repeated blows of calamity beat, and he succumbed. For all of us there is a measure of possible endurance.

“ And the old man’s insight revealed to him, that for the immortal soul blighted by excessive misery there could be no purification except through the extinguishing of self and absorption into the Universal Soul : therein only was salvation for the sufferer.”

Then she recalled the monk’s words :

“ All bliss is the beguiling of the spirit away from the true path. Through suffering only is the path to salvation.

“ For each there is some form of illusion which entices the soul to cling to the flesh ; and blessed is the hand which ruthlessly destroys the illusion.

“ Consciousness of evil is the awakening to the Error inherent in all life ; it is the first step to the knowledge that the supreme need of the spirit is release from life.”

Never had she experienced this “ enlightenment through suffering.” The troubles of her married life had been but as foils to the brightness of her days ; passing clouds between

great expanses of sunlight. Her one great grief, the death of her eldest son, had been soothed by the love which encompassed her, and healed by time, and her own unfaltering pursuit of the duties which lay before her. Never had consciousness of the "essential evil of life" cast a blight on her days.

And had not the friar himself confessed that the eight years of his wedded life were years of bliss, which he would live through again and again in endless repetition? And for nearly forty years such a life had been hers! How happy had the old man been in reviving the memory of those days, the very flower of life! With his lips he repeated his creed of misery, but in his heart he still cherished the unquenched desire to live again in the flesh that life of active work in the world and of unfailing affection in the home.

Surely the error lay in the ascetic creed of the intellect, not in the affections of the heart: these were holy, that an aberration of reason: a baseless imagination of dreamers withdrawn from contact with active life. If this pageant of life be rated as an illusion, on what firm ground shall this condemnatory judgment itself be excluded from the sphere of illusory things? And since it stigmatises the holy joys of the wife, the mother, the guardian of the house, as temptations to a fleshly life away from holiness—is not the doctrine self-condemned by its very monstrosity?

Then her heart revolted from a doctrine which cast this blight upon the flower of life; that of the divine Ráma and his consort Sita; that of the Lord Krishna and his beloved Rádha and his playfellows in the pastures of Brindaban. What a creed was that which would brand these models of holy life as iniquities!

CHAPTER XVII

THE PERSUASION OF THE FRIAR

RĀDHIKA DEVI retired to rest in the latticed chamber over the gateway, and slept lightly until after midnight, when her husband, returning from the lecture at the temple, awoke her, unhasping the door to the staircase. By the light burning in a sheltered recess, he saw her head raised and her smile of welcome.

In answer to her questions regarding the recitation, he dwelt on the reverential delivery of the Dravidian doctor, and especially on his sonorous intonation, but he admitted with a deprecating smile that he had grown very drowsy, and added : " Surely none but a hero like the great Pándava Arjun could have followed with unflagging attention the Song of the Blessed One from beginning to end, even though delivered by the Deity Vishnu himself and treating of right conduct."

" And our good priest ? " she asked.

" Ask him yourself," he replied, smiling. " The melodious phrases of mystical import were certainly soothing to his pious mind. But as for us, we who have passed our days in the business of the bank and the mart, need more definite notions with a clear bearing on conduct."

" But perhaps, my dear," she returned, " to play with the subtle notions of these logicians as counters of thought, needs special training from youth upwards ;—it is a craft, even as that of the banker and husbandman and worker in gold. But in the morning I will hear what our priest has to tell. And now, if you are not seeking sleep—and indeed you seem much refreshed after the repose at the lecture—I will tell how I passed the evening."

He laughed, answering : " The breeze stole gently through the wide courtyard, calming the senses."

He listened with warm interest while she related her converse with the Dásnámi monk, and when she had concluded, he remarked : " Truly, wife, you were better employed listening to that simple monk than I to the learned Dravidian doctor. I should much like to talk to the man. I will send our priests with presents to the Abbot of the Sarada Monastery and ask him to fix a time for me to visit him. I may then perhaps induce our old compatriot to come here again."

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As soon as the family priest was free from the prayers and rites due at the dawn, he started for the monastery, and on his return reported that the Abbot would be well pleased to receive a visit from the banker that morning. As to the monk, Shio Dás Tirthá, he had found him sitting apart in meditation, but failed to induce him to speak ; the old man had motioned him away as an intruder—indeed, as the priest expressed it, whisked him off as an importunate fly !

But when at the first watch of the day, Premnáth went to the audience, the monk had left the precincts, wandered away none knew whither, perhaps to his favourite haunts among the temples of Bait or " The Island." He gathered nothing of spiritual value from the abbot, who seemed chiefly eager for political news of the north and Rájputána—and took his leave, disappointed with his visit. As it was still early in the day, he ordered his driver to proceed onwards beyond the lodgings to the lighthouse on the cliff, intending to inspect the building and enjoy the wide outlook from the gallery.

Not far from the lighthouse on the little promontory stands a monument erected to an English officer, killed in a fight with a band of Wághir pirates, who had taken refuge in the temple precincts. At the foot of the monument a religious mendicant had settled down, a self-constituted warden of the grave, and mediator between the spirit of the dead soldier and seafaring men, who brought small offerings to secure protection against a possible evil influence from the deceased.

Premnáth, followed by the Priest Parkotam, stopped on his walk at the little tent of matting, and throwing a copper coin on the cloth spread out to receive alms, exchanged a few words with the lean old man with the one eye and the pock-scarred face. He was passing on, when the priest said in a low voice: "Stay, master. If I mistake not, the old monk you were seeking is crouched under the back of the tent."

"Wait for me then, by the carriage," replied Premnáth; and he sat down on the mat in front of the mendicant.

"I judge, Bábáji, from your speech," he said, addressing him, "that you come from the land through which the Jamna flows."

"True, Bábúji," replied the man; "I was born and bred in the holy land of Braj."

"You followed the footprints of our Lord Krishna from the home of his childhood to the home of his manhood, here at the World's End."

"Master," replied the mendicant sententiously, "you err in this. The Lord never trudged as a footman over the dusty roads from Brindaban to Dwárka: no footprint of his was impressed on the way. Know you not, that he who built the palaces of the gods, even the great architect Viswakarma, raised up a great city here in Dwárka; and in one night all the race of Jadu were wafted hither from their homes in Mathura; and at dawn they awoke each in his new house in the divine city facing the setting sun. All this by the will and command of our Lord Krishna."

"So indeed it is recorded," said Premnáth. "And it was here that the Lord prepared a safe refuge for all his people from the great fiend Kalayávan and his countless demon warriors."

"Aye, truly, master, it is as you say."

Then from the back of the hut a quiet voice intervened, saying:

"Heed not the words of this worthy old man: they are confusion merely. Know that Krishna, Lord of Mathura and Dwárka, was driven forth from Brindaban by the great King

of Magadha, and fled across the waste to found a new home here by the western sea."

"Don't listen to that old man," said the mendicant sharply ; and he tapped his forehead and winked with his one eye.

But the intervener continued : " But at last he, Krishna, in the forest was shot through the foot by a hunter who mistook him for a lurking deer, and he died from the wound at the sacred confluence below Somnáth."

The mendicant nodded assent : " So much is true, that he did pass away sitting at the meeting of the waters below Somnáth, for I know the place well. But this old man mangles the story. The Lord's task on earth was done, and the destined day of his return to the heaven of Indra had come. He arose in all his glory out from the flesh and vanished ; and even in that very same moment, his city of Dwárka sank beneath the sea ; and now those who have eyes endowed with divine insight may see in the calm blue depths the temples and the palaces, the houses of the nobles and the bankers, such fair buildings as never before or since have risen in any land."

While he was speaking the man from the back of the tent moved forward and sate down by the mendicant, and Premnáth, from the description given by his wife, recognised the Dásnámi monk.

" Ah, there the old fellow is right, Bábúji," he said. " These visions are seen only by those blessed with divine insight ; but, alas ! none so endowed are to be found in these days. Now what I should say is this : that those vanished temples have been created anew in the very home of Krishna, in Mathura at Jai Singh's *ghát*, and the builders are the lords of Mathura—the great Seths Gobind Dás and Lakshman Dás. What say you, master ? "

Premnáth smiled, as he answered : " Truly, good friar, in these days we bankers are men of weight."

" In the days of peace, when the sword is sheathed, power springs from gold," said the monk sententiously.

" In war time, too," replied Premnáth. " As the fire drives yonder steaming ship, so we bankers furnish the fuel for war."

"Perhaps, master banker, you are one of the Seths from the Jamna," suggested the monk.

"Nay, not one of those princes of our money dealers. Yet not unknown among the people of Katahr—Premnáth Tiwári, Sáhu of Ronáhi am I."

"And your father's name was Jánkináth, landlord of Chilaura," added the monk quickly.

"That is one of our villages on the Rám-ganga."

"Ahi, ahi!" exclaimed the monk, striking his forehead.

"How strangely I am pursued."

"Pursued? What mean you?"

"Pursued by voices," replied the monk. "Enticing voices from the days when I wandered a sinner: voices tempting me to regret the world, which I wisely abandoned to follow the path of holiness."

"What voices?"

"First the voice of a wise and gentle dame—the noble consort of Bábu Premnáth Sáhu of Ronáhi——"

"Then, surely, you are the good monk who entertained and instructed the lady through the night, and related the history of a pure and happy life ending in the sorrow which was the gateway to holiness."

"Master," replied the monk solemnly, "her voice, that lady's voice, awoke the memory of those days, and I was constrained to speak; and then I sinned in my heart."

"In what way? May I hear your error?"

"A yearning for those days was excited in my heart, and I strove not to repress it; and it grew so strong that I longed to live through again those days of happy illusion. Even now I cannot check it, for I long to return to that dear land and draw my last breath below our village, where the ashes of the mother and her children were scattered into the holy stream."

"I understand," said Premnáth. "You had believed that your purified spirit was free of all desire, and you awaited in patience the consummation of your austerities in union with the Divinity."

"That was my error," replied the monk. "My weak spirit yielded, when the voice of that gracious lady called back

those days of my life in the world. But when this morning I received your summons, I withstood the temptation, and wandered away, and hid under this old beggar's tent. And behold, led by fate, I unwittingly address him whom I sought to avoid."

"Good friar," replied Premnáth, "may I put another interpretation upon this our meeting?"

"Why not?"

"Then thus I would interpret: If this last wish of yours be fulfilled, then will your satiated spirit be freed of all desire, all but the one supreme desire for union with the Divinity."

"True, good master, for I have no other wish in this world, but this one only: if this were granted, peace would settle upon me."

"But," continued Premnáth, "the way to the riverside is very long, and you are infirm, old man. If you should try to reach your bourne on foot, you would surely perish on the road, and dying thus with this desire in your heart, you would lose the fruit of long years of austere life."

"It is true," said the monk. "There can be no salvation for one tainted with desire of an earthly object."

"And mark this," continued Premnáth; "you spoke of fate leading you to me. But regard it rather as a Divine guidance to one who will aid in transporting you to the riverside where first you saw the light; that there, wetting your feet in the holy stream and delivered from the last desire, you may shed your earthly shape and pass into eternal rest."

"For know, good friar, I am here to secure fulfilment of your wish. In my train you shall be borne swiftly and with ease to your old home, to Sardárnagar by the Rám-ganga ford."

The old monk sat silent, slowly realising the offer made to him; and Premnáth continued: "You will come with me as my spiritual brother and comforter. At my request, not unsupported by gifts, the Abbot will permit you to depart."

The old man sate in silence, looking over the sunlit sea, his many-wrinkled countenance set as a bronze cast, no flutter of the nostrils in the rise and fall of breath.

"What is your answer, good father?" asked the banker at length, and the monk slowly emerging from his meditation, answered:

"Bábúji, there is indeed shrewdness in your counsel; yet I think the full measure of my sin is not clear to you. Know that my soul is impure with the love of days long gone by. When that wise and gracious lady spoke, I yearned to recall that past and move her to sympathy. Then those days of youth and manhood arose as enticing visions of happiness. I affirmed that those days were not evil, but a flowering of life good in itself. And now, as I sit before you in this clear sunlit air, I cannot brand those days as a pollution of the pure spirit fettered in the illusion of material life. But now, alas! what my inmost heart desires is not final union with the Divine Spirit—but rather to renew those years of happiness before calamity fell upon our house and swept away all that made my life complete within our little sphere. Thus clinging to life in the flesh, am I a lost sinner; and all my long austerities have been vain."

Premnáth reflected some little time before he replied: "Thus then, good father, after many years of austerities, you have become aware of a chasm yawning between the two sides of your conscious life—a chasm you cannot bridge over: the chasm between your doctrine and the voice of your heart. The sages whom you follow have taught that all this life in all its stages and phases is an evil thing. But now, from the summit of age, your heart is clamant that your life in your prime was good in itself: in revolt against the sages your heart affirms with persistent passion its joy in individual life, and would crave for its repetition into infinity under conditions such as those you recalled: and the pain you suffered you now see as a shadow displaying the brilliance of your happiness. Is it not so?"

The old monk assented.

"Then consider this: May not this longing of your old heart be a warning that the truth is not exhausted by the doctrines of the sages, and the artful process of the intellect? And I dare affirm, that the persistent will to live again a pure

life such as yours, can be no sin ;—but is rather the protest of the heart against an error of reason ! ”

The monk bowed over the feet of Premnâth as before a master.

“ *Pâe lagan* : I touch your lotus feet. Through your words I hear the voice of that wise and gracious lady with whom I conversed through the night ! Surely others besides the sages of the past may be inspired ! ”

He arose to his feet, and speaking with a sudden decision : “ Come then, my master, obtain my release from the Abbot yonder, and I will abide with you and that lady, and together, I think, we may tread the path of salvation. To-night I will come to your sojourning place.”

Leaning on his staff he went slowly down the path to the beach and was lost to sight.

Then the old mendicant, who through the long conference had sate dozing in front of his little heap of smouldering ashes, said, wagging his head and smiling :

“ He mutters and murmurs I know not what, that garrulous old Dásnámi—ending never. But he is a fellow-countryman of mine, and I bear with him. But I fear he has worn out the patience of the Bábúji.”

“ Take this then as a further offering for your kindly reception,” said Premnâth. “ The air is sweet here, the outlook most fair ; and this seat of thine—I think an auspicious shadow falls upon it from that column sacred to the English soldier, who gave his life to sweep demons of wickedness from the earth even as did Râma and Krishna.”

Then he rejoined his priest by the waiting carriage and drove back to his lodgings.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CREED AND THE HEART

RÁDHIKA DEVI passed the morning with her attendants visiting the temple and its precincts, with its many separate shrines, giving alms to priests and mendicants and receiving their voluble blessings ; and wearied out reposed through the long afternoon. But when the foam flakes on the crests of the waves began to catch the flush of the evening, she went out to the seat by the porch. Again she saw the red ball of the sun plunge into the sea, and her planet like a jewel glittering over the horns of the frail moon. But now the vast expanse of the ocean under the boundless dome, with its myriad stars, oppressed her with its immensity and her own utter insignificance, a mere speck in infinite space ; and she shivered as from a sudden chill. The brief twilight passed into darkness, and the longing grew strong to be in her beloved home once more, at this holy time of lighting the lamps ; and she went inside to seek the narrow comfort of the four walls.

The women bowed in silent prayer before the kindling lamps, and the little chamber was lit with the friendly light. Seated here Rádika enjoyed a faint reflection of her home and its dear associations, until she was aroused by the voice of the old monk calling down blessings on the house. She bade Mohani invite him to enter and await the return of the master ; but the old man had resumed his seat beside the little platform looking out seaward, and merely shook his head signifying his wish to be left alone. Then Rádika becoming restless went out to her former seat on the little platform above the old man, and after greeting him with respect, she

said : " I would not think that in returning no answer to my invitation you were discourteous, but you left it unheeded."

But the monk remained unmoved and silent, with his eyes fixed on the sinking moon, and not until it grew dusky behind the haze, did he turn to speak : " From the shore, at Puri, by the temple of the Lord of the World, I have watched the sun rise out of the ocean ; I have stood erect at Rameshwar Rám as he passes at noon shadowless, and the southern sea lies like molten metal ; and in the north, amid the snows of Joshimath, I have seen his red glow spread over the holy Peaks while all below lies wrapped in darkness ;—the light of life cast on the dead wastes of snow, comforting the frozen watchers for the dawn—cast by him, the Giver of Life and the Spur to Life—but anon the blasting tyrant of the noon. And here at the World's End he sinks at last into the ocean quenched, and we, freed from the oppressor, breath in the restful night. And shall he rise for me again in ceaseless round—of hope and eager effort and bitter fruit, and ever recurring vision of escape from his ruthless goad into eternal rest ?

" It was here on the western verge that your lord, the Divine Krishna, came to set the term to his earthly sojourn—here where the Sun God and all the stars sink into the boundless ocean ;—and hither I came, and without desire, pure of all attachment, I have awaited that rest unbroken by any dream of life, eternal peace in the Ocean of Love.

" I came, and waited in patience undisturbed. But now—the long calm of my soul is ruffled, and will not be stilled !

" Lady, last night your voice and your words and your presence awakened things of the past that seemed long dead, and now my heart is sore to sit once more by that holy river, where I lived my life, and where, my longing stilled, I shall pass in peace into perfect peace."

But no sympathetic chord responded in Rádika's heart as she listened to the old man's rueful voice. Irritated against him, she thought : " Such a poor thing as this might he, my dear husband, become, if he cast aside the tasks of his eager days, sit apart from the world, rusting like an unused axe

lying in a damp corner ; pondering ever on death and release from a dreary round of rites and prayers ! And at last he shall hear the call of a voice from the past and know in sorrow, conscious of wasted days, that the prime of his life was the holiness of life ; then, when as master of a great house, he ruled within and without in wisdom and strength, with thoughts of wife and child and the bank and estates—the centre of movement of a great whole—and concerned last and least with himself and his own soul. Shall the faculties of a man grow numb and wither as the fixed arm of a *jogi* ? Is not the rule divine to exert even to the end these endowments of knowledge and action ? ”

But when she spoke, after a long pause, she answered his words with decision :

“ Aye, old man, you have worshipped the Sun God as he rises from the ocean ; you have stood on the northern peaks and the uttermost shore of the southern sea and adored him in his noonday strength ; and here have bowed as he vanishes at the close of his day. But have you seen this too in your moods of adoration, that in his course over this sacred Land of Ind, he sheds warmth and light, quickening all the springs of life—that therein lies his work and therein his glory—and that when he sinks yonder, his day’s work done, he sinks but to rise again, banishing the darkness as an enemy and repeating his impulse to life ?

“ What, I pray you, are the words of that most holy prayer, the Gayatri ? Words repeated time after time through each day ? When on the eastern shore you stood erect at the dawn watching until the Sun God rose from the sea, what was your prayer ? Repeat it now ; this place is holy.”

And forthwith the old monk, at her bidding, chanted in a low tone the sacred words : —

“ Om ! Earth ! Sky ! Heaven !
Om ! That glorious Giver of Life,
That Light divine ! Fill therewith thy heart
With that Light, which bringeth understanding ! ”

“ Aye, those are the sacred words,” she exclaimed. “ The worship of the Sun as the Spring of Life and giver of understanding to the Soul !

"Bethink thee then, old man, we adore the Sun as the Giver of Life, and shall we then curse his gift of life as a burden from which to escape is the summit of bliss ? "

The old monk paused long in meditation before he bowed his head to the speaker as inspired, and answered :

"Lady, your words are winged shafts that pierce straight to the heart that is yet warm with strong life. But me, they sting with the memory of those days when I was a living man in my home in Katahr."

While he was speaking the jingle of ox-bells sounded and the light chariot with Premnâth approached. Râdhika arose to receive the master inside the house.

"Do you follow the master into the house," she bade the monk. "Where, if it please the master, we can discuss these things further."

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Râdhika Devi ascended to the upper chamber that she might receive her husband free of constraint on his return. She clung to him now as to a beloved from whom she was to part, and every moment of union was precious.

He came to her at once, and told of his visit to the Dwârka banker : of his gossip concerning the Baroda Court and the administration of the Okhâmandal District ; of the trade and traffic brought by the pilgrims—more than ever before had come that year, and with fuller purses ;—but concerning the temple itself and its associations the banker showed no signs of intelligent interest.

"Places of pilgrimage," remarked Premnâth, with a laugh, "seem holy as they are distant from the pilgrim's home ; valued in proportion to the toil of attainment. The measure of reward is in the intensity of the toil : thus the self-inflicted torture of the anchorite establishes his claim to the Heaven of Indra. May his reward be adequate compensation ! "

"You speak as having suffered some fresh disappointment," suggested Râdhika.

"Then I went to the Abbot again," continued her husband. "He is certainly a shrewd man, and rules his college of monks

strictly. As to this good soul Shio Dás, he described him as a simple fellow, and said that if a placid temper and lack of guile qualify towards salvation, he was so far well endowed. He was confident the old man would bring no disgrace on the brotherhood ; and, finally, consented to let him depart in our company."

"The man is here," said Rádika. "I have already spoken with him. He is indeed a simple soul, but I would rather listen to him than to most of our learned doctors."

"Well, well," he replied, with a smile ; "our doctors are apt to range beyond the grasp of those who have not gone through a preparatory discipline."

Then asking her to follow him when she felt disposed, he went down to receive the monk, who was now waiting on the platform in front of the little reception chamber.

"I greet you, Bábáji," said Premnáth with polite address when the old man arose at his approach. "I come from your spiritual master, who permits you to travel with me, if your wish to do so still holds good."

"Bábúji," replied the monk, "I am ready to depart. Ere long I hope you will lead me northwards to my goal."

"When our circle of pilgrimage is complete, we will hasten back to our home."

"When my face is turned thither, my soul will be at ease."

"Ah, you are eager as a youth on travel to return to his bride," replied Premnáth, smiling. "But come, sit you by me here in the light. The evening is young yet, and the hour pleasant for converse till time of prayer and supper."

"Your comparison was apt, master," said the monk. "To return after many years to the home of happy youth is indeed a pilgrimage of love. In all the great plain of the world, that spot is hallowed."

"Aye, good monk, if the old home were still standing there. But, when we reach the spot around which our imagination has played so long, the river indeed runs by as of yore, the cliff and the grove stand above it, but all that made the place

sacred is vanished : the voices of the loved ones, the touch of the hand ; and we find only a bare skeleton bereft of life, and the spot we deemed sacred before us, common and profane. The fond imagination is shocked, and we turn pained away. Good monk, know that the holy place you seek lies in your own heart only, here as you sit in a distant land, and not by the river-bank in the north."

But the old monk smiled in gentle deprecation, and replied in his quiet voice :

" If, master, it should fall out as you forecast, then I shall have nothing further to desire—my end will be attained, and my end will be peace. My hope is only to live until I lie down to final rest, with my feet lapped by that sacred stream, where my wife and children drew their last breath. Then will my brethren gather to bury me near the spot where the pyres of those dear ones blazed ; where I stood and cast their ashes into the stream. And hereafter the women of our village will bring offerings to the tomb of the old Dásnámi monk, who was once the ministering priest remembered now through all that country-side for his piety and kindness. And thus shall my memory live for many days among our folk, whose fathers and grandfathers knew me well."

The Lady Rádhika, who had taken a seat in the background to the right of her husband, heard with sympathy the monk's reply.

Then Premnáth urged again : " But you, who have worshipped at every great shrine of this Land of Hind, from the abode of the eternal snows to the southernmost strand ; in the temples of the gods and the places hallowed by the dwelling of saviours of men ; in none of these did you find peace of the spirit ; and you seek it where there is neither shrine nor imprint of divine feet ;—in an unknown village, where for generations poor mortals have dwelt unblest by any vision of the Divinity, haunted by spectres of famine, disease and oppression ; and there your grave under the cliff shall vanish, borne away by the floods as a thing of nought."

Again the old monk smiled placidly, as he replied in a tone of gentle persuasion :

“ Know then, first, that we of the Dásnámi brotherhood are the initiated of the mystery : Salvation is the exaltation of the Soul through purification from all desires and attachments, proper indeed to her fleshly life, but incompatible with her existence in a higher sphere. But this purification is a process in the Soul itself, affected only by willing abnegation of self ; by detachment of the heart through the will from desires belonging to this fleshly life. This act of renunciation must be freely willed : it is not a gift that can be received, but a spontaneous mutation within the Soul itself, springing first from a clear apprehension that the Soul separated from the Infinite Spirit suffers tribulation never ceasing.

“ If this supreme knowledge fill the Soul, then is neither rite nor ceremony nor prayer needed for her salvation. All of these, together with meditation on the saints and holy things, and the solemn influence of holy precincts, are but means to predispose the heart to abandon the illusion of individual life and realise knowledge of this great mystery. But in themselves they are futile : the one thing needful is the spontaneous motion of the percipient Soul.

“ No God can bring about this change ; no gift to a God can bribe him to perform this miracle : the contrite heart only can transform itself by its own will through its own knowledge. The saints, the divine beings manifested in the flesh, the revelation of the Song of the Blessed One—these have opened the way by the offering of knowledge ;—but to think the thought, to follow the divine way, this hangs solely on the will of man.

“ Salvation is the breaking of the will to live by the will itself !

“ Thus far then, touching the aids to salvation from pilgrimages to holy places. But learn further, that for *us*, *all* places are alike holy, for God pervades all. I am He and He is I. When I lay my hand on my heart, I lay my hand on His shrine.

“ Divine Insight into this mystery was vouchsafed to me, not in any temple, not in any place trodden by a Saviour’s foot, but as I sate in long-drawn misery by the river under my

wasted home. And now I know well that when once more I sit upon that sacred bank the last link of attachment will fall from me, and I shall pass into bliss—into that ocean of love which is God.”

But Rádhika, listening to this smooth discourse on mysteries, thought : he seeks to entice my beloved away from the firm ground in which are rooted the holy duties of life into a waste haunted by dreams ;—and her irritation against the old man returned. She shifted restlessly, but remained silent, waiting for her husband to reply.

“ Good monk,” he said, “ you allow at least this merit to a pilgrimage to holy places, that the heart may be predisposed by the sacred surroundings and associations and the solemn rites of worship to receive the knowledge which is the only light to salvation.”

“ To the chosen few only,” replied the monk. “ But the atmosphere of our great temples is tainted by the mass of the pilgrims who come only seeking satisfaction of fleshly lusts : their prayers are for health and happiness, prosperity of house and children, boons in this world of illusion or in the Heaven of Indra ;—boons to be received as gifts without toil or discipline for their acquisition. In their worship they lay bare their sin of insatiable desire, though they would cover it with a cloak of piety ! A malevolent dæmon would grant such prayers, in order to entice them onward in the endless circle of birth and rebirth, baiting the hook of misery with specious joys ! But tell me of yourself and your own experience here. You have performed the rites and prayers due to the Lord of Dwárka, to your own divinity, the Lord Krishna. What followed ? ”

“ I will tell you at least what did not follow,” replied Premnáth : “ no illumination of the mind and no refreshment to the heart ; no quickening of knowledge, no comfort to the restless soul. But tell me, good monk, how shall the worshipper know that the light of truth is falling upon him ? ”

Then the monk answered, his face suffused by his complacent smile : “ How shall a man know that the dawn is breaking ? How, that the sun shines on him ? Even so shall

he become aware of the light of holiness : so and not otherwise. If he perceive it not, if he does not feel the holy conviction transfused through his whole being, then the light is not within him.

“ With this light comes the first glimpse of the way to Final Deliverance from re-birth through union with God ;—then the thoughts are relaxed from worldly things—from the pursuit of wealth, from attachment to wife and child and home and city, and the votary will join the brotherhood of those who have abandoned all these things, to follow the path of complete renunciation—the only path to salvation.

“ If then some rays of this divine light have shone upon you, leave your trade and your home and all within it, don the yellow robe, and dwell with the brethren, who will give you support in moments of weakness and encourage you to tread the hard path of discipline.

“ Again I say, by thine own will alone shalt thou be saved. By no prayer, by no magic charm from a god.”

The old monk's voice dropped to an almost toneless whisper as he spoke the last words.

Then the Lady Rádika, unable to listen longer in silence to these doctrines of desolation, turning towards her husband : “ May I speak, my lord ? ” And when by a glance he signed permission, she addressed the monk sharply : “ Good monk, do you bear in mind what I said of the manifest will of the Sun God, the Giver of Life, the Destroyer and Restorer of Life again ? ”

“ Lady,” replied the monk, “ as I said, your words are winged shafts to pierce straight to the heart—the heart throbbing with life. And such is the heart of a woman. Her deep-rooted desire, the very core of her nature, without which she were no woman, is to produce and foster life ; to bring forth sons and daughters, strong and fair, to reproduce life in endless succession. And her yearning is ever to man as the instrument whereby this desire, which *she is*, shall be fulfilled. She inflames him with passion which nothing shall still until her purpose is served.”

“ Aye,” replied Rádika swiftly, “ she is even as the God

of whom you spake, she baits the hook of misery with specious joys ! ”

“ Aye,” he returned, “ the very fount of Illusion, beguiling man to live ! ”

“ Aye,” responded Rádika, “ a Malignant Dæmon, enticing man to revolve in the circle of birth and rebirth in endless misery !—Aye, the mother who bore thee, and tended thee with unwearied love ; the wife who loved and worshipped thee ; these the centre of all thy holiest feelings, one and all, Malignant Dæmons to hold man by sacred bonds within the circle of endless misery, whispering that there is happiness beyond a passing relief from suffering !

“ And this is the issue of the mystical knowledge vouchsafed to your brotherhood ! The wholesome spirit revolts against it even as the natural stomach shrinks with disgust from the foul food of the Aghori *jogi* ! But I, master monk, dare affirm, that a doctrine that leads to a result so loathsome can be nothing but a web spun by diseased brains—brains perhaps crazed by stress of calamities, or depraved by an unnatural life.”

But the monk, undisturbed by her scornful passion, replied in a quiet voice, his face lit up by his complacent smile.

“ Lady, as I have said, the first step on the path to redemption can be taken only when the Light of Knowledge illuminates the mind : then only is revealed the futility of individual life in all its stages, from that of the meanest creature that crawls on earth to that of the God dwelling in the Spirit realm. This revolt of which you speak in such moving words is the passionate clinging to individual life as manifested here in the flesh ; but when the divine light shines within the heart, desire withers under its rays, vanishes like a dewdrop under the sun.”

But Rádika shook her head : “ Words, master monk, words only ! What you and the misled band who renounce the world regard as the Supreme Light, that I see as a blight upon the soul, paralysing the will until it is benumbed as in death. No yellow robe of the Renouncer would I don ; rather as now I will change my cotton cloth for a silken garment,

and prepare the supper which shall sustain the strength of my lord to live and work to the end in this sphere in which our happy lot is cast."

And looking to her husband for permission, she left to superintend the preparation of the evening meal.

Left alone, the banker and the monk sate in silence musing on the lady's words and symbolic action. At length the former spoke, referring not to what was in his mind, but to an earlier stage of their discussion.

"Thus, good monk, it is only when a man has abandoned the world that he can enter upon the way to salvation?"

"That is true."

"But having abandoned the world, how shall he be sure the Light of Supreme Knowledge shall shine within him?"

"Through the discipline of abnegation it may be kindled—or it may not."

"Thus then, he may lose both worlds."

"In rebirth he will enter a purer life, and thus win a step on the way."

"And thus through ages of abnegation he may achieve the Light, and his will to live may perish under its influence?"

"Such is our doctrine."

"Answer me then: Granted that at length the mystical insight into the Illusion of Life is attained, how shall one be sure that even this is no aberration of the mind, like the fixed idea of a lunatic?—One I knew, to whom the dread Goddess Káli appeared, saying: 'Thou shalt sacrifice on my altar the little daughter of thy neighbour Mohan, and straightway the plague that wastes thy house and all the village shall be stayed.' Then by stealth he led the girl outside the village, and with his chopper struck off her head, so that the blood spouted over the red shrine. And now that man sits in the Asylum in complacent mood: no more victims of the plague died in the village: he was the saviour even as Ráma before him; and he cherishes the belief that the villagers worship him as the chosen instrument of the Dread Goddess; that it

is they who feed and tend him there in the asylum as a holy man. So I saw him plump and sleek and supremely happy."

But the monk answered: "Who shall say that the Dread Goddess did not appear to him, and command as he alleges and believes?"

Premnáth shook his head deprecatingly, and closed the conference, proceeding to perform the rites preparatory to the evening meal.

CHAPTER XIX

RÁDHIKA'S TESTAMENT

THE first watch of the night had long passed, and the Lady Rádika lay on her couch in the upper chamber unable to sleep, restless with a feverish head and a dry husky throat. The light breeze through the venetian shutters fanned her hot face, but brought no refreshment. Then she bade Mohani call her husband, who was sleeping in the open courtyard under the stars.

"My lord, my beloved," she said, "I cannot rest. My brain is fevered. Maybe if you will lie here near me, I shall grow calm and sleep."

He held her hand : "Your hand is dry and hot, your pulse beats wildly and your voice is husky," he said anxiously.

"'Tis nothing, I think, but the remnants of the cold which has hung about me since that night in the storm when we were drenched with the rain. If I can sleep it will pass."

She lay back on the pillow and he drew over her a light cashmere shawl, and closed the slats of the shutters against the breeze. She submitted, and lay still, though the covering and heat without the breeze distressed her, and increased the throbbing of her head. He drew a little couch near her, and lay down, feigning sleep.

And she too, by a determined effort of the will, lay motionless, fearing to disturb him. But neither slept, each feigning only to soothe the other to rest.

And thus the hour passed on to midnight.

But a fit of coughing overcame her resolution, and she sate up struggling for breath. He was at once by her side.

"I disturb your night's rest," she said, as soon as she could speak. "I am so sorry."

"Have you slept?" he asked, feeling her hot dry forehead.

"Not a wink. And you?"

"I lay listening to your breathing. There is no sleep in me to-night."

She begged him to open the shutters; she was choked for want of air; and propped against the pillow, she faced the breeze and her breath came more freely.

"So it is better. If you cannot sleep, sit here beside me."

He sat on the bed, she leaning against him while he held her dry hot hands.

"I think it is nothing but over-fatigue and the excitement of much talking," she said, feeling calmer and eased by the touch of his cool moist palms. "It will pass with the night as such discomforts have passed before. We will forget it awhile, and perhaps as we converse quietly drowsiness will creep over me, and I shall awake refreshed."

He was willing to believe her judgment sound. He pressed her hands, and she continued speaking in a low voice:

"The words and story of that old monk have been constantly in my thoughts as I lay tossing restlessly. You noted how his real nature strove to burst the bands of his creed, and that he vainly attempts to subdue his heart. His yearning is ever for those days long ago when he lived with his wife and children by the dusty road to the ford and bridge. It awoke with renewed strength as he told his story. His creed but a husk of his real self."

"It seemed to me that his discourse was addressed to his own conscious frailty."

"In vain he strives to convict his better nature of error," said Rádhika. "Behold then, how after many years of the discipline of a Renouncer, his heart sprung again to life at the sound of old voices and the once familiar speech—a true and holy impulse to cast off a stifling creed!—A stifling creed, the growth of an unwholesome life!"

"To-night thoughts of this have coursed through my brain, and a light of truth has shone upon me, clear and distinct as the sun to-day before it sank behind the haze. These *rishis*

and *jogis*, these great saints and sublime renouncers, severed from the realities of the world ; from loves and hates ; from joys and sorrows ; from duties to wife and child and lord and slave ; from all those innumerable warm ties which make up life ;—they have sunk in a dark pool of meditation, and there in blank emptiness have dared to judge life and all its manifold shapes and colours and ways. Some a coward fear has possessed, and a distorted judgment, others a mania for self-torture ;—and these half-dead, half-maniac souls have presumed to give judgment against those who are whole and full of energy, and brave to live and combat in the great arena of this God-given world. The best half of their nature has withered in solitude ; and those unrealities which they have spun in the sameness of their days and nights, these they have deemed to be the very voice and shapes of things in the world of light.

“ In such a fabric of illusions woven by these dwellers in the dim pools of silence, this poor monk sought refuge to escape from his great affliction, his weak spirit bending under his load of grief.

“ Ah, my beloved, believe me there is more wisdom hidden under the impulses of the heart of a pure woman than in all the subtleties of thought which these self-withered sages have spun from their brains.

“ In the lives and loves of our Lord Ráma and the divine Síta, his spouse ; in the devotion of Lakshman ; in the joy of Devaki and her divine child Krishna, in his delight in the fair Rádha and all the sports of Brindaban ; in these we see revealed the glory of life into which we are born ;—and upon this, profane Renouncers, lopped of half their souls, would cast a blight.

“ Who does not know that this world of ours is full of miseries ? But as our Lord Ráma, noble, generous, full of love, strove against them with unfaltering heart and overcame them—the very type of what a man should be—so shall each man strive to act and live.

“ Not to destroy our faculties of love and joy, but to enhance and ennoble them ; not to wither our desires, but to

purify them ; not to concentrate our thoughts on self and salvation of self, but to expand our hearts to encircle those bound to us by bonds of family and friendship, and to identify their well-being with our own.

“ Ráma, the lord, the devoted husband ; Ráma, the implacable destroyer of evil things ; Ráma, the obedient son, the loving brother ; Ráma, most gentle to the weak, most helpful to those who strove for good ; Ráma, most stern to the wicked ; Ráma, the destroyer of Rávana, the Incarnation of Evil : the great warrior, the loving husband, the truest friend ;—he, our lord, shall ever be held as the type of life for every true man ;—even as his wife, the divine Síta, for every good woman.

“ Ah, the arrogance, the presumption of these Renouncers, proclaiming that their way is the only path to salvation ! Hearts corroded by intellectual conceit brooded in solitude ! ”

Rádhika paused, and clasping his head to her bosom, added in a half-broken voice : “ Pardon me, my beloved, that I venture thus to speak. These ideas have been seething in my brain ever since we left our home and its circle of love. I speak only what springs from the heart of a simple wife and mother, and all her action is but the unfolding of her secret faith ! ”

He felt her cheek burn against his brow and the quick beating of her heart. A fit of coughing overcame her, and when it passed she lay back exhausted, breathing rapidly.

“ Rest now quietly,” he said. “ Do not speak more.”

“ My beloved, you will ponder well on all I have said,” she said under her breath.

“ Surely, surely, my darling. Every word has pierced to my heart, to nestle there beside my love for you. But you are very sick. I will call Dibiya and old Mohani : they are gentle and helpful.”

But she checked him, desiring only to rest in his arms. And with her head on his shoulder, she fell into a broken sleep until the dawn drew near, when, waking dazed, she recovered her perception, after much coughing, and spoke in a low voice : “ I am very ill : my chest constricted, my breathing clogged.

Let the women come and apply hot fomentations and the steam of poppy-heads ; and bring hot rice-water with ginger," ordering as for another : without her guidance they seemed helpless.

And now an awful feeling of dread fell upon Premnáth. He left her to the care of the women, and hurried away to his friend, the Dwárka banker, to inquire for a skilful Baid. When after an hour he returned with the Brahman medical man, he found his wife lying still, her breath short-drawn and quick, but conscious and able to speak.

The learned man looked grave after his examination of the patient, but assured them she would be better again as soon as his remedies had become operative, and departed quickly to prepare the drugs.

"Dear husband," she said, smiling brightly upon his anxious face, "you know I am very strong, and I have never been weakened by disease ; so surely I shall overcome this gripping fiend who would choke me. And as soon as I can move, we will go back straightway to our dear old home. Oh, I would never leave it any more. If only my dear Har Sundari were here, and I could feel her cool, gentle and firm hand and listen to her sweet voice comforting me : none can nurse and tend the sick as our dear Har Sundari. And the little mother, our beloved Indráin ; if I could hear her by me, prattling to her babe ! Her mere presence brings fresh strength to the heart ! "

"My darling, my darling," he said, with broken voice. "Yes, we will go back to them, and never wander any more to strange places ; you and I. All our best is there ; all our heart needs is in our home, in our beloved Ronáhi."

And he sat beside her holding her hand, while she sank into a light sleep.

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But no relief came from the Baid's treatment : the obstruction in the lungs became more and more dense ; the patient's brain began to be overclouded, and she murmured random words.

All that day they watched her and through the night till morning dawned, and the fell disease continued unchecked.

Premnáth stood outside overlooking the sea, clasping his hands tightly together, with an ever-growing fear gnawing his heart. Then the old monk came to him.

"Master," he said, "I have heard that last night there came to the Rest House the English doctor who visits the dispensary here. A wise and skilful man, I have heard. Summon him—at least to consult. That gracious lady is the light of her house, the centre of all. Let her not perish if any aid be at hand."

Then Premnáth : "What matters all our ancient ways ;—if he can aid. Quickly, show me the way to the Rest House."

The old monk went on with rapid pace, followed by Premnáth, who now was possessed with an aching dread lest the English doctor should have already departed, for the sun was very soon to rise.

But they found him in the veranda, about to mount his horse and ride away on the Porbandar Road. He listened with sympathy to Premnáth's eager request.

"I will ride on," he said. "I know the house. You can follow me. The attack is clearly a case of pneumonia. No time is to be lost, if it is not, as I fear, already too late."

A brief examination was sufficient to satisfy the doctor that both lungs were deeply affected by the fell disease which destroys the strong man in the very fulness of his strength.

And Premnáth stood beside the bed with constricted heart and clenched hands, waiting with impassive face the doctor's verdict.

"The disease has gone far," said the doctor. "There is little we can do to aid nature in its struggle. I can hold out but little hope."

He laid his hand on Premnáth's shoulder, and looking with sad eyes into the rigid face of the husband, shook his head.

"Throw open the windows," he ordered. "Let the sunlight and warm air fall on her," and prescribing poultices and promising to send a soothing draught, he departed.

And now Rádika, feeling the sun shining upon her,

recovered consciousness, smiled upon her husband and spoke again.

"Husband, my dear lord, let me be borne out into the sunlight and free air, even to the edge of the sea. Take me to the holy place. If I am to die, let me die there, as beseems one of us—not here within these unhallowed walls."

She ceased speaking, breathless, but still grasped his hand.

Her word was a command ; even as she lay helpless ; she was most wise.

So they covered her with the silken garment, and bore her down to the shore where the ripples of the ebbing sea now lapped the sand. There, with the warm water of the ocean washing her feet, she lay unconscious, her head shaded by a little awning, until the sun stood at noon. And all the time Premnáth crouched by her with his eyes fixed on that dear still face, holding her hand to feel the thin throb of her pulse.

At noon it ceased to beat.

Then he sank down on the sand, covering his head. "Ráma !
Ráma !" he murmured, all his senses benumbed.

And the gentle breeze fanned the calm face ; the ripples of the ocean lapped her feet. She had passed, the light of his world.

BOOK THE THIRD

THE PILGRIM AND THE FRIAR

CHAPTER XX

THE COMFORTER

THE affliction of the prolonged obsequies had passed, and the ashes, cast into the holy Meeting of the Waters, had mingled with the ocean.

Premnáth, bare-headed and motionless, crouched on the floor of the upper chamber, where he had heard the last words of the dear voice, looked seaward through the open window.

He had scrupulously performed every ceremony of the funeral, repeated every prayer, given every requisite order ; but through all, his own thoughts and words and acts had seemed to be those of another, which his real self watched apart with dull curiosity lighted by no vital interest. And now, with dry eyes and countenance showing no sign of emotion, he sate unnoting of the passing hours. The joyous breeze blew upon his face, the waves tossed their crests and glistened in the sun of the first watch, laughing in their brilliance and strength and mocking the mourner for whom the light of the world was quenched and the mainspring of energy snapped. And a vague feeling of resentment took shape in the thought, that his house and home had been destroyed by the Dæmon of the World, as an ant's nest by the hoof of a proud horse galloping on his way, reckless of the havoc inflicted.

At length the family priest ventured to approach and sate

down in silence over against him. But Premnáth gave no heed to his presence.

"Master," asked the priest timidly, "what are your orders for me?" And when Premnáth looked blankly at him, he continued: "The messenger I sent to Porbandar with the telegram to your son has not yet returned. He was to wait at the office for a reply."

Premnáth dismissed him with a wave of his hand, and turned to watch the sparkling of the restless sea; the waves cresting and breaking, and the graceful flight of the gulls over the foam. And the thought emerged, on this scene she looked, she looks no more, and behold all is unchanged: a light of the world has vanished, and all things move and live unwitting of the darkness; love has perished, warm love, and they feel not the chill.

Then came to him Dibiya, the wife of the cook, and fell down before him.

"Master," she cried, in a broken voice, "I beg of you, break your fast. Food is prepared. So she would have commanded, and as she commanded so we would act—always, we who lived under her holy rule."

He looked coldly at her, and beckoned her away. But her words had touched a true chord, he repeated mechanically: "As when she was with us, so we would act, we who lived by her holy rule." And their meaning began to penetrate his mind.

When the hour of noon had come he turned round from the seaward view, and saw seated in the corner of the room Shio Dás Tirthá, the Dásnámi monk, watching him as a dog will watch his master.

"May I speak?" asked the old man in his gentle voice.

Premnáth looked at him awhile in silence, then signed permission, and the monk moved forward to a place on his right hand. He spoke as one clothing his thoughts in words for himself only.

"As a heavy blow will stun the senses, so doth the sudden loss of the beloved benumb the mind: it lies bereft of feeling and will as the body of sense and motion.

"We watch the changes of outward things as clouds that gather and vanish in which we have no concern : the rising of the sun, his stand at noon, his sinking in the ocean bed ; and those ships that pass, coming whence we know not, nor whither bound, nor care we to know ; shadows on the surface of a mirror. The thinking brain and feeling heart are numb as limbs under prolonged pressure or excessive cold.

"Ere long, slowly, little by little, the heart awakes, but to despair ; that the foundations of life have crumbled, that every fixed point to which we clung is loose ; all foothold lost, that we sink into a dark abyss. Oh, to be swept into oblivion, swift as the drift on the edge of the torrent's fall. Woe ! woe ! of the pang of a heart breaking with insatiable desire !

"This agony, no words can soothe it, no medicament bring relief : to live is to suffer and endure !

"But the man of firm heart and clear brain shall say, speaking in the secret recesses of his being : Wilt thou live ? or wilt thou die ? If thou choose to die, then abandon the world and join the brotherhood of Renunciation. Know that to live is misery ; that this thy affliction is a benign light to display this great truth : the illusion of life, its inevitable misery. Withdrawn from fleshly cares, filled with faith in attainment, thou shalt reach that bourne of final oblivion, which only is salvation.

"Thus shall the pangs of grief be exchanged for the peace of resignation and patience to await in sure hope of eternal rest."

The monk paused, and then addressing Premnâth directly in a tone of gentle admonition :

"But, O my brother in misery ! wilt thou live ? Then give heed to my words. The most tender attachments of thy life are torn and bleeding, for thy agony there is no speedy remedy : even the balm of sympathy soothes but for the fleeting moment. Thou must endure. Thus shall each day bring some little order into thy dislocated life : slowly, very slowly, shall new attachments be formed to bridge the gulf that yawns around the lonely soul, and unite it once more in the warm fellowship with men.

" But thou must endure, hiding thy grief in a secret chamber of thy soul : by outward expression it is fostered, and by the pitying of many men the soul degraded and holy grief soiled. Keep thy grief in a shrine apart, and therein with moans unheard and tears unseen, worship thy lost one, the beloved of all the world. Thus after many days the influence of a benign spirit shall settle upon thy meditation, and thou shalt learn that death cannot wholly snatch from us the holy companionship of love.

" But, O my brother in misery, give heed to my words ! If thou wouldst cling to life, thou shalt do so without reserve. Return to thy work with a resolute heart ; hide thy grief in a locked shrine sacred to thee and to the one lost.

" And know this : None shall bear his grief about openly to cast a blight on the ways of the world.

" Choose then which of these two paths thou wilt follow : there is none other fit for those with brave hearts to resolve and clear understanding to guide their way.

" Thus, master, I have spoken out of a full heart, from long garnered knowledge of the ways of life."

Premnáth listened with unmoved features, his eyes fixed on the many-wrinkled face of the speaker lit up by the pity of a gentle soul ; and the words were engraven on his passive brain never to be erased. The voiceless agony within his heart was soothed ; his affliction lost the aspect of a special visitation of a dæmon jealous of his great happiness, transformed into a phase of the misery attached to all life ; his individual sorrow engulfed in the ocean of universal misery. He bowed his head on his hands, and sate long in silence, not unconscious of the soothing presence of the old man with the pitiful heart.

" Good father," he said at length, raising his head, " you have spoken as one knowing sorrow and the ways of the suffering heart. Truly, I see stretched out before me two paths ; and the one I choose I will follow steadfastly to the end. But not now, not in this place can I choose. I will go to our old home—the Nandyávarta we named it, and the symbol is engraved by the door. There a light will fall upon me to

show the path I must travel onward until at last released by death.

“ We will depart at once ; you to rest by the sacred stream until your end ; I to my house in Ronáhi, hallowed by her, for which my heart now yearns.”

And he arose delivered from his lethargy, and summoned his people to prepare for departure.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WAYFARERS

AROUSED from his dumb misery to consciousness of the dislocation of his life, Premnáth found some measure of relief when out of the disorder there emerged a first definite purpose, to return forthwith to the house consecrated by her ministrations, the one spot in the waste of the world where the lost spirit was still active. Some peace he might find within those hallowed walls, during the years, happily few, which remained to live through this severed life.

A temple priest approached him saying : " See below the temple on the strand the innumerable cenotaphs raised to those whose happy spirits have taken their departure purified from holy Dwárka." But he answered : " Where she lived and worked and loved, the honoured centre of her home, there not here is the holy site, and her cenotaph is the living household which was hers."

And he thought : Throughout the land are countless shrines raised where saints and heroes have taught and acted, and to these the pilgrims wend for aid and inspiration : for *him* what place so holy as that dwelling which she had loved and ruled ?

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He was eager to depart, and learning that a coasting vessel lying off the roadstead was to sail for Porbander at dawn, he arranged for the passage of himself and his party to that port, whence a steamer would take them direct for Bombay.

As he was going on board a telegram was delivered from

his son, stating that his grandson Bál gobind had left Benáres to join him at Dwárka. But he refused to delay his departure. Arrived at Bombay he took the train without break to Prág. There too he refused to delay though it was the month of Mágh, the season of purification in the Sacred Tribeni. On the following morning he arrived at the station of Sháhgarh, some seventy miles from the monk's destination.

But he now began to shrink from the ordeal of re-entering his desolate home, and to secure a few days' respite, sent his servants and baggage round by rail, while he himself as a pilgrim on foot proceeded with the monk direct to Sardár-nagar and Ronáhi. He hoped that the fatigue and hardship and distractions of the road would relieve the ceaseless aching of his heart for the one irrecoverable face.

At sunrise they started on their journey, Premnáth dressed in an ochre-stained waist-cloth hanging loosely over his knees, a quilted jacket of the same colour, and a warm cap with side flaps covering his ears. He bore, slung from his staff, a blanket and drinking pot : a mournful pilgrim bringing from the shrine he had visited no comfort for his days : bound for a goal where was darkness and desolation only !

Their way led them apart from the high road, through villages, where they were assured of kindly hospitality in return for the blessings of the monk and his silent disciple. At nightfall the peasants assembled to listen to the discourse of the monk and in the morning gave them respectful escort to the village boundary.

This new life of the road began to exert a soothing influence on Premnáth. It brought freedom of thought of the morrow and indifference to all but the passing hour. He saw the people of the villages under a new and more interesting aspect. On his own estates he had been treated as a respected but powerful master, strict indeed in the performance of his own obligations but equally strict in exacting payment of his dues. His relations with the people had been those of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor, master and man ; he had been one vested with the power to make and mar, one therefore to be propitiated by meekness and ready service. Now as a simple

pilgrim he dwelt among the peasantry on easy terms ; they chatted freely before him on their daily life and family affairs, having nothing to gain from him and nothing to fear ; they were frank and kindly and courteous, and eager to display the best side of their characters to the holy men. The barrier of rank and caste no longer checked human intercourse, and he was linked to them by their common humanity.

Each day's journey was short, for the old monk walked slowly and required frequent rest. They started in the morning when the sun had dispersed the cold mist which covered the fields until the day was advanced. And the easy walk until midday sufficed for the untrained powers of Premnáth, who was well content to bask in the sun through the afternoon, brooding and meditating and conversing quietly with the monk.

Towards noon on the tenth day their path led them past the site of a deserted village on the ridge of the upland, where a lofty semel tree reared its wide-spreading crest and ungainly boughs over stumps of mango trees and tangled thorn bushes overgrowing the ancient mound. To the north-east the country sloped gently towards the distant river valley, an unbroken tract of young wheat and barley, dark green and emerald as it shimmered under the sun and gentle breeze. On the summit of the great tree the green pigeons were fluttering ; the doves murmured plaintively among the scanty boughs of the mango trees, while a lordly peacock stood by the edge of the bushes displaying the full fan of his royal feathers.

" Let us tarry here, Bábáji," said Premnáth. " No more restful spot shall we find in many a long day's journey." And casting his staff and blanket on the ground he sate down on the soft grass at the foot of the semel.

Seated side by side they silently gazed over the wide expanse of cornland to the village groves, and the peacock undisturbed by their presence strutted to and fro uttering his grating cry.

Then profound peace settled upon the spirit of Premnáth ;

for a while he was as one desiring nothing, regretting nothing, poised in mental equilibrium. On his mind, as on the surface of a placid lake, were mirrored the lights and shadows and fixed and moving things. And the still old man beside him became a part of the calm world encircling his peaceful soul.

On the horizon a small cloud swelled slowly into a glorious pile of white and grey folds, coil on coil, the upper edge dazzling with the reflected sunlight; and slowly again it vanished leaving but a shred hanging solitary in the steely sky: built up, completed, dissipated in the boundless air: a world created, a moment resting, then dissolved.

Premnáth smiled in his heart at the vision of evolution and disintegration.

A chatter of pea-fowl came from the thicket and one by one the hens issued into the open, meek and sober in gait and garb, to follow their lordly master through the young wheat. No rival bird disturbed the harmony of domestic rule, and no young brood distracted service. Here, too, was brief rest in the rise and fall of life, like the pause of sun at noon.

Two grey squirrels ran round the great stem of the tree, pursuer and pursued, with shrill cries audible only to fine strung ears. As the pursuer drew near, the pursued with fresh effort escaped, and in spiral rounds they reached the axil of the lofty branch and vanished.

Then again Premnáth smiled in his heart: the rogue deems he chases freely, and overcomes while drawn onward and compelled to serve: victor and vanquished, one under two aspects.

And thus he sate with passive soul, responsive to the ever-changing aspect of his fair surroundings, until, noon passed, his lengthening shadow was cast before him. Then his companion began to shift his feet and shiver, shut off from the sun by the cold shadow of a mango tree. He arose slowly with stiff limbs and moved into the sun.

"Yonder is the village of the Játs," he said, pointing to a grove near the eastern horizon, now shown clearly under the afternoon sun. "That white patch between the trees is the

gate-house of the headman's homestead. The path runs straight through the cornfields unbroken by any gully."

"Time enough then before us," replied Premnáth, remaining seated while his companion stood before him and leaning on his staff enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his thin frame.

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They remained thus for some time in silence and Premnáth's mind became quickened to thought. Looking up with pensive eyes to his companion, he said softly :

"Noon passed unheeded, hallowed by no prayer from my lips."

The Monk : Profound meditation may be not less pious than recited prayer.

Premnáth : If the thought has pierced to divine knowledge, and expatiates therein.

The Monk : In profound meditation only can thought burrow through Illusion to the Divine Reality.

Premnáth : My passive soul was but a mirror wherein was reflected the passage of transient things ; a lake ruffled by the breeze ; the spray yielding beneath the alighted Dove ; the ground ringing to the beat of the horse's hoof ; the bell awaked by the stroke of the hammer ; an instrument played by forces not itself ; receiving only, sounding only as touched ; no potent engine self-moved to pierce the shell of Appearance to the core of Reality.

I was in rest, perfect rest, oblivious of the past and its pains, indifferent to what is to come, and untroubled by desire to know what is not revealed to the passive mind.

The Monk : Reveries idle except as rest before renewed strain of thought.

Premnáth : Aye, the closing of the senses to the great world without ; the concentration of the mind on the little world of the soul, the narrow world of our poor human soul !

Look you, Bábáji, thus have I thought : All is the manifestation of the One—Brahman—through the energy of Brahmá, the Creator : all I say, the world without no less than

the world within—man himself, his heart and brain, but one single phase of the great manifested All. How then shall the thinker attain knowledge of Being, if he grope only in this one phase of creation among the myriad alien shapes? The senses of man are framed most delicately to read and interpret the Great Open Book of the World; and of this one word, one phrase, one paragraph at most is writ on the inner tablet of the soul; but the whole must be read before the meaning of the whole can be grasped.

Wouldst thou attain to knowledge of Being; then must every faculty of the mind fulfil its purpose: each an emanation of the All-one, with distinct function and purpose.

But thou and thy teachers would maim and stunt, aye completely frustrate our outward directed faculties, and would foster into a monstrosity one only, Meditation, turned inward upon the obscure movements of thine own little individual soul! A profane destruction of the balance provided by the Divinity for the activity of man in his progress through life.

Good father, from the first watch of the day to the third I have sat with senses open to the world without, unconscious of the world within, and a calm of the waking mind more complete than I have known before has settled upon me. And now with lucid thought, I see that such was the creed in acts and order of life of that wise companion I have lost; a creed not set out in words, but embodied in her wise and happy nature, whence proceeded benign influence on all who lived beneath her gentle, yet righteous and steadfast sway.

Premnáth ceased, and after a long meditative pause the monk replied:

“Master, it has been written by Sankara, the great doctor of Knowing and Being, in his interpretation of the divine maxims of the Vedanta——”

But Premnáth interrupted him: “I know not that inspiration of divine wisdom closed with the revelation of the Upanishads, nor that we should seek truth only in these and the teaching founded thereon by the great doctor of divinity.

But enough ; in this holy hour of pure light diffused through my soul, I will not dispute concerning his doctrine ; let not the light of present revelation be dimmed by the dust of ancient controversies. Come, let us move onwards to our shelter for the night, in yonder village of the Játs."

CHAPTER XXII

THE JÁT HOUSEHOLD

PREMNÁTH led the way along the narrow balks of the cornfields, walking for the first time since his desolation with head uplifted and confident step; and the monk followed, brooding over his companion's last words, spoken indeed with reverence, but fraught with profanity.

At a little distance from the village a group of men by the ditch around a grove of young shisham trees, advanced along the cart track to meet them. Two tall Ját with bushy beards led, followed by the watchman, distinguishable by his red turban, blue jacket and solid bamboo staff, and a white-clothed clerkly man, the village accountant.

The two leaders bowed before the pilgrims, touching their feet and repeating the respectful greeting, *Páe lágan máháráj!*

"News of your coming has reached us," said the elder of the Ját. "Our guest-house is ready, and I and my brother beg you will bring blessing upon our household by tarrying with us."

Premnáth and the monk accepted the invitation with courteous words, and followed their hosts to their spacious homestead in the middle of the village.

When they had rested and washed with due prayers, and eaten the generous midday meal, the two pilgrims sate quietly side by side in the hall of the house overlooking the courtyard. The children ran to and fro hushed by their presence and peeping timidly at the strangers. The cows came in from the pastures and were lodged in the long shed on the opposite side of the yard. The women tended and milked them and set the milk to scald, speaking to one another in low voices. The

shadow of night began to fall and they lit the lamps in the niches, prayed before the flame, and then disappeared into the kitchen to prepare the evening meal for the men. And Premnáth watched their movements in the same placid mood as in the morning he had looked out over the cornland, in close sympathy with the homely scene.

The elder of the two Játs now respectfully approached his guests, begging permission to make a request : the women of his family, he explained, desired to offer their obeisance to the holy men, while he and his brother retired to take their evening meal.

The women came, with heads modestly veiled, three in number, the mother of the two brothers, an aged woman with white hair, and the wives of the sons, both strong women with muscular arms, tall beyond the common height, stepping firm on their feet as they crossed the yard.

Premnáth signed to the monk to address them, for his mood now impelled him to observe and listen only, and he was disinclined even to speak. Then the old man in his gentle voice :

“ O mother of the noble brothers, masters of this house ; and you, happy mothers of their fair children, may the Lord shed blessings on their heads, and on yours and on all this kindly house ! ”

“ We touch the feet of holy men, whose prayers surely bring blessings upon us,” said the old dame ; and they touched the pilgrims’ feet and sate down on the edge of the mat.

“ The Lord was gracious in that he directed holy footsteps to our poor dwelling,” said the old dame fervently.

Then the monk replied : “ A happy chance has brought us to this pious household—for so we deem it—where the stranger receives graceful hospitality. But, speak now, good dame, without reserve ; something there is, which you and these ladies your daughters-in-law seek from us. And surely what we can do, we most gladly shall perform.”

“ Good father,” she began, “ I know that knowledge is gathered by saintly men in their wanderings through the wide ways of the world, and from the Scriptures, and from long

meditation. They see into hidden things and possess power to help the pious who come to them in distress."

"My daughter," replied the monk, "the light which has been vouchsafed us, we would share with those in reverence who seek it."

"Then, good father, I pray you listen to what I have to tell. And know, that my sons, both of them, aye and these their wives, hold my words in great respect, and what I counsel they do not lightly thrust aside."

"So it is well," interjected the monk as she paused.

"Then, good father, thus our case stands: This dear daughter-in-law, she sitting here on my right, is the wife of my younger son. Now once more she is big with child."

"May blessings alight on the fruit of her womb!" said the old man reverently, raising his hands towards her. "If a girl child be born may she live to wed another Ráma; if a boy, may he find a Sitá for his wife!"

The three women bowed their heads and touched the ground before him.

"Words of happy portent, father," said the dame. And then with some hesitation, looking towards the silent Premnáth, added: "And this disciple of yours; may we speak before him as one knowing that words addressed to a spiritual father are a sacred trust?"

"Surely, dame," replied the monk. "He hears and marks, but reveals nothing of the household in which he has been guest. And if, good dame, you need guidance in worldly affairs, he is more fit than I to guide you."

"Then I can speak at ease. Know then, good father, that this dear daughter of mine, wife of my younger son, hath three times brought forth the fruit of her womb, three several times, in due season, but each child, a girl—and, father, not one has lived."

"Ah!"

"Perished even ere it drew breath!"

"Ere it drew breath?" repeated the monk.

"Aye; and if the child she bears beneath her bosom now be not a man-child, then is it likewise doomed to die."

The monk now understanding the import of the communication, replied with a slight ring of harshness in his gentle voice: "I take your meaning: in this household of Játs of the Chaudhri clan, the ancient rule holds, that no girl is born to live."

The old dame bowed her head and continued in a lower tone: "Never within the memory of man has the wedding train brought a bridegroom to this house."

"Many households both of Thákurs and Chaudhris in this land of Katahr have such a record as yours," said the monk.

"Aye," assented the dame, "the custom, ancient and thereby strong to bind, prevails in many houses of the clan. No man among them may be called father-in-law. And this dear woman here by my side, hath thrice suffered the pangs of child-birth; hath thrice arisen with teeming breasts and heart yearning for the solace of the little one, and filled with the bitterness that she can bear no man-child to her lord, whom she loves and honours."

"Bitter, bitter," said the monk. "Motherhood is the sacred right of woman; if she be robbed of it, her comfort in life is destroyed."

"Ah, you pity her hard lot, good father. Know that we have wearied gods and saints with prayers, and made offerings at the most holy shrines; but no light of hope has shone upon us. But now with your coming a new hope has sprung in our hearts. I have looked well upon the calm of your aged face, and listened to the comfortable sound of your voice. This dear daughter has seen the kindly light in your eyes, still bright above your withered cheeks, and a new hope has flowered in her longing heart. If only, good my father, you will lay your hand over her womb praying that the blessing, the goodly boon, she seeks, may be granted to her!"

Then the younger woman bending forward touched the feet of the monk, and murmured:

"Have pity on my hard lot! Grant me the touch of your holy hand, and speak the spell to save the babe I bear. Father, I have suffered much: I cannot endure again; let me rather die!"

"My daughter," replied the monk in a compassionate voice, "if any act of mine, if any prayer can comfort thee——"

But here Premnâth intervened. He had listened immovable, but now a sudden impulse of active sympathy and indignation at wrong shook him from his passive state.

"Tell me, dame," he said, in a tone of authority; "how many months is this woman gone with child?"

"Past seven months, my lord."

"And the three girls she bore, was each born in full time?"

"In full time, my lord, of a strong and healthy mother."

"All well formed to breathe the vital air?"

"Had they but breathed and sucked the mother's breast."

Then turning to the young wife: "Uncover thy face: before me an aged pilgrim there needs no veil."

The woman obeyed at once, displaying a homely face, marked by the anxious look of pregnancy, and stained with the tears streaming from her large and lustrous eyes.

"Weep not, my daughter," said Premnâth in a softened tone. "Most baneful to the babe in the womb is violent grief."

"Aye, my lord," interposed the old dame. "That is most true. If she were but persuaded that she is to bring forth a man-child her tears would vanish before the sun of her laughter. And, master, she is indeed a merry soul. And so shall it be, if this holy man will but grant her prayer."

"And if the child notwithstanding the spell be born a girl, how shall she bear the most bitter disappointment, and forgive the deception practised upon her?"

"Master," replied the dame readily, "if a boy be born, then he will be strengthened through her hoping heart. If a girl, then her anger at deception and her bitter disappointment—what will this be beside her mother's pangs? A grain of wheat added to a basketful."

Then Premnâth thought: If the old monk lay on his hand and speak the spell, what comfort to this poor creature! How easy to do this! But after pondering awhile, turning to the young wife, he asked:

"Tell me this : If it be the will of the Lord that thy child, though born a girl, shall be permitted to live, wilt thou love and cherish her even as a son ? "

"My lord," she answered in a low voice, "I could but grieve at the miscarriage of my husband's hopes——"

"Aye, thou wouldst rightly do so. But, I ask, wouldst thou give thy fostering care to a daughter even as to a son ? "

"Alas, my lord," she answered dolefully. "*He* would look upon the girl askance, and in his angry mood, cry bitterly : 'Thou brat, that dost usurp the seat due to my son ! Shall some bridegroom, if haply found, come to squeeze us dry for the wedding feast, and call to me, father-in-law ? My lord, my lord, he would hate the sight of the girl, and how could I love what he hates : that which comes between me and him ? '"

"Then, woman," said Premnáth, "this only is thy prayer : to bear a man-child ; and if a girl be born thou wouldst not seek to save her life ? "

"My lord, my lord," she exclaimed, "how can I live from day to day working against my husband's will ? I bear the pangs of baulked motherhood, in all submission to his behest."

She covered her face with her veiling-sheet and bending forward with her head clasped in her hands broke into loud sobs.

Premnáth turning to the old dame was about to speak, but she anticipated him :

"My lord, this my dear daughter doth rightly read my son's heart : he loves her well, but he is stern and will abide by the ancient practice of our house, even though she thereby suffer pangs of hell."

The young wife looked up with streaming eyes, and clasping her hands as in prayer, cried in a broken voice : "My lord, my lord, have pity ! let this holy monk give the help I ask ! My heart was filled with hope when I saw him come hither following you." And her head once more sank over her bosom.

"What means she, old dame ? " asked Premnáth.

"My lord, she had a dream last night, and when you two holy men came, it was shown forth as true."

"What dream?"

"It was after midnight, she started up with a cry of terror and told me all the vision, saying——"

But Premnáth interrupted her: "Let the woman speak: I would hear it from her own lips." Then turning to the young wife, he laid his hand upon her head, speaking gently: "Be comforted, my daughter. I pray you tell me what you dreamt."

"Aye, my child," urged the old dame. "Check your sobs, and speak. This pilgrim, a holy Brahman, is surely one to interpret a dream aright."

Then the young wife after a little while uncovered her face and spake:

"My lord, thus it was with me. I lay on my couch sleeping, my mother here beside me, and awaked with a cry of terror. She clasped my outstretched hands, saying, 'What is it, child? Hath a serpent stung thee?' Then I clung tightly to her crying, 'No sting, no serpent, but a dream of terror.' And when the beating of my heart was stilled I told my dream, even thus: I seemed without, at the house door, I quite alone. I know not how I came there, but it was before dawn and the moon shone clear upon the threshold as I sprinkled it with holy water and drew the lines with chalk and prayed, as we are wont to do. Then behold beside me stood a begging friar with bowl and staff, naked, but in the moonlight I saw the fangs of a wolf between his lips, glittering ivory as he spoke, whining for alms, rudely drawing close to me. I answered in anger, 'Stand back. How come you at this hour, while I stand in prayer, and no dog barks?' Then he grinned like a snarling wolf, his great teeth glittered, and his eyes shot fire like a cat's in the dark. So facing him I pressed back to escape into the house; but the door was closed and barred against me! Then breathing hard upon my breast, he growled: 'Thou givest not alms! thou shalt yield me the fruit of thy womb to devour. Yield freely, or I tear it from thy flesh.' I tried to shriek for help, but my voice failed,

and the black wolf with gaping jaws reeking of blood stood over me—ah, I smelt the clotted blood ! Then voices from above, men's voices but thin in sound and from afar. 'Stand firm,' the words I heard ; 'stand firm and save thy child !' And behold two old men, *jogis* with shaven head and face, soared downwards swooping like kites, and I saw that each bore a trident of burnished steel to pierce the wolf. Then at length I found my voice and shrieked aloud to them for help ; and awaked bathed in sweat with wildly beating heart. But the wolf and shaven faces of the two venerable men remained in my vision, and if I close my eyes I see them now ; and tremble at the bloody jaws stretched to tear my entrails."

"Such indeed, my lord, was the terror of the night," added the old dame fervently. "And I held her pressed to my bosom until dawn, soothing her terrors. But when we sitting within saw my sons bring to us two venerable men, 'Surely,' she said, 'these are the holy men of my vision who came to save my unborn child from the ravening wolf.' And, ah, good sir, at once my little daughter here was buoyed up with hope."

"A most strange dream," said Premnáth meditatively.

But the old monk interposed eagerly : "Surely a divine vision showing clearly we may aid her as they ask."

"Doubtless, doubtless," said Premnáth in a tone to check the old man's hasty impulse. "But first let us interpret the vision with due care. Tell me then, good dame, how came you to think the touch of this venerable monk would secure the birth of a son ?"

"Ah, sir, this was the interpretation of my elder daughter, she here on my left. But, speak you, my daughter, and freely."

The young woman thus addressed drew aside her hood exposing a handsome face adorned with large almond eyes full of laughter, a dimpled chin and mouth, and she spoke without hesitation, in clear words :

"Willingly, mother, will I tell all to these reverend old men. Their words are a comfort to hear, and to address them

a boon. They will know how far I was wrong or right in my interpretation. Then, it was thus I thought and spoke my thought, after I had looked well upon your venerable faces ; for I had pondered over the dream all the morning while I went about my household work. I thought, four times have I been brought to bed, each time have I borne a son,—now a necklet of living jewels, each a gem to adorn a queen. If then, so I thought to myself, if this sister of mine be big with a man-child then against *his* life no danger could come from the dæmon wolf ; and there would be no need for the *jogis'* aid. A boy is protected, and lives as all mine have lived. Surely then she again bears a girl, once more to be snatched away, even as born to die. But in the dream there came two *jogis* of the upper air hastening to save the child from the destroyer. This then surely means, being interpreted, that her child shall live : but to live, I know it must be born a boy.

“ Thus then, my lord, I thought and reasoned : if this aged and venerable monk will lay his hand upon my sister here, over the spot where she feels the babe to move, then by his touch and the spell he will speak, the sex of the child shall be changed, and thus shall it live and all the portent of the dream be fulfilled.”

“ Aye, my lord,” exclaimed the old dame. “ Thus she spoke, and she has a clever head to see the truth through the mist of a dream. And thus my younger daughter filled with hope, and we all join in prayer that the boon we seek may be granted.”

The monk again moved to speak, but Premnâth checked him :

“ One moment, brother, there is more to be unravelled ere we decide how best to intervene. Dame, your daughter thinks acutely, aye, reasons like a Kayasth clerk, and speaks well her thoughts. But, look you, she is as yet inexperienced in the art of dreams, and her interpretation needs some amendment. I will show you that she has overlooked the very point of all, that the *jogis* of the upper air came *not* as saviours ; they came to *destroy* the wolf disguised in a holy

garb. What is the interpretation of this wolf, that shall be set forth to you clearly, and thus all the full meaning of the dream be revealed.

“ But understand this first—and I speak as one knowing—the sex of the seven-month child in the womb is fixed irrevocably ; no spell or prayer or laying on of holy hands can change this unborn child from girl to boy. This take from me and the good monk here beside me, and holding these my words firmly in your minds, hear my interpretation of the dream.

“ That aged man of the vision in the holy garb of a begging friar, who sought to devour the fruit of this young wife’s teeming womb—that dæmon, venerable from age and pious cloak, was a symbol of the ancient custom of this house, the destroyer of that which the Lord had framed to live and adorn the world as wife and mother. And further, those two *jogis* from the upper air, who swooped down to pierce the wolf-friar with their tridents : first their weapons were symbols of the lightning, the Great God Siva’s levin bolt, and declare them to be divine agents ; but insomuch as they were clothed in religious garb, it is revealed that their mission was spiritual, directed that is to the soul of man ; and the evil they were sent to root out was the ancient and most iniquitous usage of this house, symbolised as the wolf-*jogi*, whereby no girl born may live.

“ Thus, good dame, it is revealed that the holy men of the vision came, not as this your daughter reads, to save the child by change of sex ; but to abolish the rule, seeming pious from its antiquity, but in the eyes of the Divine Being who sent them, impious as the acts of the strangling Thag.

“ Through the destruction of the evil shall be attained salvation : this is the rule of the Great God Siva as manifested in this vision, as in all things that live and move upon the earth.”

Premnáth ceased, and after a long pause turning to the elder wife whose interpretation of the dream he had amplified and amended, he asked : “ Do you now understand the full purport of this strange dream ? ”

"My lord, as yet I am bewildered and perplexed," she replied.

"Answer me then. When you saw this my reverend companion and me together, you said, behold these are the *jogis* of the dream?"

"Aye, my lord," she answered promptly. "The promise of the dream seemed fulfilled."

"Then further: as the *jogis* of the upper air descended to destroy an evil thing, so the behest of the portent to us two here, their counterpart, is clearly to destroy some evil?"

"Surely, that is so."

"But—and here give good heed—as holy men we act not through physical force, but through moral force; and moral force is directed to the heart of man?"

"Surely to move the heart away from evil to right doing."

"You say well, good lady. But, in the dream, whereon was the threatened evil falling?"

"Surely on the unborn child of my sister here."

"Most truly answered. Thus then the evil that threatened and which by the vision we are divinely sent to destroy is that custom of this house which threatens to destroy this woman's unborn child?"

The elder wife hesitated a moment before she answered: "My lord, I cannot gainsay this interpretation of the divine will as manifested to us in the dream."

Then Premnáth, turning to the old dame, who had followed every link in the interpretation with intense interest: "Behold then, Chaudhráin, thus step by step we reach the full meaning involved in this most portentous dream. A divine injunction is laid upon us, upon me and this my venerable companion, to uproot this evil custom of your house. And for this there is one way only: to turn the hearts of your sons from following this ancient rule, that they may freely will to preserve this unborn babe to live the life ordained by God when he quickened the seed within the womb."

"Ah, my lord, my lord," exclaimed the dame. "I see now; most surely this is the interpretation of the divine

vision. But, my lord, I know not how this may be, for never has a girl child been born to live in this our house."

"To show the way is the task ordained for us, good dame; for you to act as we direct. Answer me then first on this point: Thy son, the husband of this pregnant woman, is he steadfast to do what he undertakes?"

"Most assuredly, my lord," she replied earnestly. "The bond he seals from his heart, that he will fulfil though he die."

"And thy counsel has great weight with him?"

"He has ever been a son to honour his mother," she answered in a tone of pride.

"Thus, then, thou shalt say to him: 'We have spoken with these pilgrims, and they have revealed the interpretation of the dream you wot of; and they have counselled us, knowing of things divine—Brahmans and learned in the Scriptures. And I pray you, my son, hear them, and be guided by their words, that hereafter all may be well in this our home.' Wilt thou speak thus?"

"Ah, my lord, what you ordain, I will from my heart. The Lord hath indeed sent you here in the very point of time to guide us aright."

"Then," commanded Premnáth, "bid your sons come, for they have dined and washed."

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"Bábúji," said the monk, when the women had left them; "you have a hard task before you. I know these Chaùdhris from old days. They will follow their ancient usages in spite of warnings of the holy and wise. They are a stiff-backed brood, who understand force indeed, but hardly yield to persuasion."

"If persuasion fail," replied Premnáth, "I have in reserve a threat of discipline, which may bend their backs, stiff as they are. But I would fain strike at the root of the evil by moving their hearts to revolt against this iniquity inherited from a brutal past."

"May you succeed," returned the monk. "But well I know how little of the gentler sentiments nestle in the breast

of a Chaudhri. Their nature is harsh and little prone to compassion. Honour indeed of their house and clan ; manly conduct ; resolution to uphold their rights and exact full penalty for a wrong, and execute vengeance at any cost ; all these are the virtues of our hosts ; but pity, kindliness to the weak dwell not in their stern hearts."

" True, good father," replied Premnáth. " The race is not unknown to me, for in the ledgers of my house many generations of their names have run. They are as strict to pay the debts of their fathers as their own, and I think through their sense of pride and honour I may find a channel to move them. But, see, they prepare to come. Do you watch my words and read their countenances, ready to aid when I refer to you. Address them first in simple words of exhortation leading them to give full heed to what I shall say."

The two brothers came forward, and when the courtesies had been exchanged and they had taken seats facing the lamps on the edge of the mat, at a respectful distance from their venerable guests, the monk spoke :

" My sons, I hold that we have been well guided to your generous hospitality, and our hope is fervent that our coming may shed a blessing upon your house to endure through generations yet unborn. But if perchance this our hope be not fulfilled, we shall depart in sadness, and on our way we shall speak in humility one to the other, saying, we clearly saw, as revealed by the Divine Spirit, the task of duty laid upon us, and now that we have failed therein, surely this was due to a lurking impurity in our hearts, which disqualified us from giving effect to the Divine will. Through severe penance we must seek that higher purity needed for the transmission of the Divine Spirit into the hearts of those we adjure to tread the path of rectitude. Thus, my sons, I pray that through our agency, there may spring up in this house the good we now seek to implant."

Then the elder brother, awed by this impressive exordium, answered, joining his hands reverently : " God grant, reverend fathers, that we may be fit to receive the blessing you seek to bestow."

‘ Speak, then, brother,’ said the monk, turning to Premnáth. ‘ May the good we so clearly discern be revealed to these our hosts as their own.’

Then, addressing the elder brother, Premnáth spoke :

‘ This venerable monk says well : to fail in a divine mission is bitterness to the soul, being a sign of the unworthiness of the instrument. But not the less is he a sinner, who hardens his heart against a message such as we are appointed to deliver. So much, my friends and hosts, has been made clear to you by this holy monk.’

The two brothers bowed their heads in assent, and Premnáth continued :

‘ Now therefore as to the purport of the message which he bids me deliver. Your mother, to whom our respect as yours is due, came seeking counsel and aid from us.’

Premnáth paused, and the elder brother, touching a jarring chord, said : ‘ Aye, great faith have women in the counsel and power of prayerful men.’

But Premnáth answered gently : ‘ My son, the helpless in severe distress turn to spiritual powers, men even as women. But the women suffer more and are weaker. Hence it is as you say.

‘ But to continue : the good dame brought both her daughters-in-law and bade them speak freely to us as being men of prayer withdrawn from worldly things. Thus we were permitted to question them and learn what was needful to know before we could offer counsel.

‘ Now the dame addressed this venerable monk saying, the younger wife was big with child, eight months gone, and besought him to lay his hand upon her and speak a prayer that the child might be born a son.

‘ And well we know, that the birth of a son sets the crown on a woman’s life ; and without this boon she feels barred out of the circle of the blessed. So we read this woman’s heart, its yearning to fulfil this divine duty, and the bitterness of her disappointment in the past : thrice brought to bed, each time of a daughter, and then deprived of the one consolation, to nurse the babe to life and love.

"Now, most gladly would this good man have given the comfort the woman sought, but we are brothers of truth, by whom all deception is abhorred, and well we know that no rite or spell can change the sex of the child quickened in the womb: *that* is fixed irrevocably by Divine dispensation. No jugglers we to cheat the simple, but righteous men and not unlearned, but knowing the course of things in the ordered world.

"You understand, my friends?"

"Clearly, my lord," answered the elder. "You deal not in magic rites, and in your wisdom know their emptiness."

"That is so. But the women came to us in good faith for counsel and help, and our hearts are sorely moved in pity for this young wife, and to give aid, when aid is asked in righteousness, is laid upon us as a divine duty from which we cannot in holiness shrink.

"Now give heed further what befell. Testing the young wife, I asked: 'If again a girl be born to thee, wouldst thou have it live?' And she wept answering, 'How can I love and foster what will be hateful to my lord, my husband? He will look askance on the brat saying in his heart, Ill-starred child, thou hast usurped the seat of a son. And he will avoid the house lest in his anger he curse his own offspring. Nay, however great my pangs, I could not foster a girl unless he, my lord, will love and cherish her.' Then she wept again, and we were touched with compassion."

And turning to the younger brother: "Friend, is there no way to avoid this cruel affliction? Must she arise from the pangs of child-bed forlorn, tortured by the insatiable longing for her offspring?"

The young man looked to his brother, who replied for him: "My lord, this brother of mine but follows the ancient usage of our house."

"That we know well, my friend," replied Premnâth. "But think: if he in his own self-will acted thus, without the sanction of immemorial custom; if he were the first to practise this sacrifice of child and mother, then I, as a Brahman and bound to follow the path of righteousness, would

curse him as the murderer of his child ! A wretch such as he should on my denunciation be hanged as a convicted murderer ! But, he has inherited this hoary custom from his fathers, and therefore it seems to him no sin against the will of God ! Aye, truly, if he had been the first to enter on this cruel path, no priest would set foot in his house to bless or pray, for the house would be banned as a polluted spot ! But we have partaken of bread and salt under your roof, knowing that under the sanction of an ancient custom, you commit an act abominable to pious men. Understanding thus, we judge with less severity. Dost thou take the meaning of my words ? ”

“ Aye, my lord,” answered the elder ; “ that we follow the usage of our fathers whom we honour.”

“ Then, I ask you to follow my words further. You see then clearly that if this practice were brought into the house by your brother first, without the sanction of an ancient custom, how accursed would be his action ? ”

The elder brother after a moment’s hesitation answered : “ My lord, I cannot deny that, but——”

“ Let me keep you to the point,” interrupted Premnáth. “ Answer this : How then shall we judge the act of him who first of all your race, sacrificed his daughter, having no old usage to excuse his act ? Answer.”

The man hesitated.

“ See, my son,” continued Premnáth, “ you dare not look me in the face and answer. Now, I will take you a step farther. This act in *itself* is sinful as you admit, aye, abhorred by all good men, and on the perpetrator should fall a Brahman’s curse ; how then shall an act accursed in its first performance, become innocent, and even venerable by repetition from generation to generation ? It cannot be ; you dare not assert before me and this holy monk, my comrade, that under any rule of sacred law, it can be justified by such repetition, being in itself an impure and wicked deed ? What sayest thou ? ”

“ My lord,” replied the man, “ I am no man of law to debate these points.”

Then addressing the younger brother :

“ My son, thou hast listened with attentive ear, and heard

thy brother's admissions, and his most feeble plea. Now I address thee. Thou hast learnt that this hoary practice of thy house is founded on a deed of iniquity ; and knowing this now, a repetition of this sin will fall as a blight upon thy soul, and if hereafter thy wife shall bear a son, on him too shall alight the corruption of the father."

The younger brother now breaking silence spoke : " My lord, I pray you, turn not away in anger from our house, leaving behind a curse in requital of hospitality ! "

" My son," replied Premnâth sternly, " upon you it hangs to determine whether our coming be a blessing. Your eyes have been opened to the nature of your actions."

" But, my lord," he pleaded, with clasped hands ; " I pray you consider this. Where shall we find bridegrooms from a clan no meaner than ours to wed our daughters ? Whence shall come the means for the marriage feasts to the proud kindred of the bridegroom, and all the throng of holy men and beggars ? Consider, if there sate now in this house three marriageable girls and a fourth to come ! Ruin, my lord, utter ruin would follow : all this estate built up by our fathers year by year in thrift and work, all would be wasted in lavish feasting ; or if we spared, then would our faces be black among our brethren, as having cast contumely on the bridal procession. And what noble house would wed a son with us on such terms ? Thus would our daughters swell to womanhood unwed, bring shame more than we could endure, the end, bloodshed ! Consider, I pray you, my lord, this hard lot of mine, the husband of a teeming woman, who bears but girls to bring ruin or dishonour upon us."

Then answereth Premnâth quietly with gentle voice : " My son, all this is well known to me ; and not unknown to me whence come the brides to houses such at thine. But now give good heed to my further words, and answer frankly what I shall ask. As to thy good wife : a loving and submissive woman, well endowed to administer and guard thy household goods, and one dear as her own child to thy mother's heart, all this have I gathered while I conversed with them. So far thy lot has been kind to thee, has it not ? "

The young man acquiesced silently, and Premnáth continued: "And of this I am convinced, that only under extreme compulsion couldst thou have inflicted on this tender wife the bitter suffering she has endured, aye, and may endure again. Speak, am I right?"

"My lord, you know these things well."

"And further, you and your brother have learnt from me and see clearly as I do, the iniquity of this practice, hitherto veiled from you by the glamour of hallowed antiquity. You now can look upon it as I do, as an ancestral curse, which, now that your eyes are opened, will pollute your house: unfitted to be entered by any holy man.

"Seeing then all this now with opened mind, you would fain seek with me to escape from this inherited curse. Speak, my son, do I rightly interpret your wish?"

"My lord," replied the young man, "how shall we be delivered from the sore evils when a girl of mine grows to marriageable age?"

"Good then, I will deal with your difficulties one by one. First as to the pretext of a bridegroom lacking. You know well there are boys more than enough among the Chaudhris for whom wives are now sought secretly through barbers and other go betweens, and brought fictitiously adorned as of equal or even higher birth. Gladly would your tribesmen find a bride in such a house at this.

"This plea then is futile and I come to that wherein you set the real stress, the ruinous expenditure of the marriage feast.

"Think then, is yours the only tribe oppressed by this burden, even to ruin? Nay, rather is there one among them all, in which the heaped-up debts to the money-lender began not from this same lavish expenditure? Aye, from the Brahman and Thákur lords, down to the poor Moraos and Lodhas, tillers of the land. Each and all in their measure suffer from this ancient custom which they dare not break through. But they bear the burden like men, as other hardships of this life on earth, with piety, and lighten it by honest toil and parsimony. They accept the birth of a daughter as the gift of the

Lord, to be a bright jewel of a house, as Sitá the bride of Ráma ; and their homes are sweetened by the happy voices and loving ways of the little maids. They have their reward therein, as I know well, I the father of many maidens, now wedded wives giving comfort and light and life to the houses wherein their lot is cast.

" Look you then, are you, you of the noble Chaudhri clan, so base in spirit that you shrink from this sacrifice, and to avoid it, commit a crime most odious in the eyes of all good men ? And yet : some self-control, strict administration of your estate, fair dealings with your banker, only this is needed ; rather than these measures of prudence and manhood, you choose to follow an accursed usage inherited from brutal days.

" Look you then, a more paltry excuse for the murder of one's own offspring it would be hard to find ! "

The two brothers hung down their heads unable to look longer on his stern countenance and the angry contempt in his flashing eyes.

But the mother, who crouched in the shadow had listened to all that passed, now came hurriedly forward, overawed by the angry scorn of the venerable speaker's closing words.

" My lord, my lord," she cried, falling prostrate before the pilgrims, " I beseech you let not your wrath fall upon this house, which you have blessed with your presence. My sons will surely comply. You shall show them the way to follow."

Then turning to her sons : " I have heard what this holy man has spoken, and a veil has been lifted. Speak, speak, thou Pema, my eldest born. It is thy mother who implores thee."

But the younger son replied : " Mother, I bow before this pilgrim and Brahman priest in reverence as before Divinity. But let me have time to ponder these counsels : they unsettle the foundation of this household as it hath been fixed from ancient times until this very day."

But Premnáth, turning coldly aside, addressed the monk : " Brother, art thou ready to depart ? "

"Aye, even now in the darkness," replied the monk. "Not one moment longer will we abide in the house where our hosts are brooding sin!"

"Nay, my lords, my lords," exclaimed the dame, with clasped hands, "I beseech you leave us not in anger. My son is perplexed, bewildered by this sudden wrench from his ancient ways. How shall he know how to act? His wits are slow to move."

Then Premnáth in a softer tone: "That is true, good dame. Not easily is a steadfast man drawn aside from his accustomed way, even though his reason be convinced. In this I will then give him help."

Then turning to the elder brother: "You have heard the appeal of your mother. Do you support it?"

"I cannot do otherwise," answered the man. "But this——"

"But as yet you see not clearly whither you are moving on the new way. Tell me, do you know me?"

"As a Brahman and a pious pilgrim, whose learning and sanctity were reported to us by the headman of Semalkhera, where you passed the night."

"Aye, but my name and rank in the world before I donned the pilgrim's garb?"

The man shook his head.

"Have you heard of the banker of Ronáhi, Bábu Premnáth Tiwári, a Kanaujia Brahman, one following the Ramat sect?"

"Surely, my lord, well known is he in all this countryside."

"How reputed?"

"A gentleman of wealth, master of many villages yonder on the Balia upland; fair in his dealings and generous to the poor and helpless."

"So. Then, know, I am he—withdrawn now from the world, a pilgrim from Dwárka by the western sea."

"Ah, my lord," exclaimed the Chaudhri, "doubly blessed is this house by your abiding here!"

"Hear then my command," continued Premnáth. "When this child is born thou shalt straightway despatch a messenger to me in Ronáhi, and I will come at once, and calling on the

name of Ráma, beseech blessings on the child. If a man-child be born, he will need no further aid from me. He will be born strong and lusty, since from his young mother's heart the gnawing fear will cease, lest her travail be all in vain. Most needful to the health of the child in the womb is the mother's calm and cheerful heart ! ”

“ Ah, my lord,” exclaimed the old dame, as Premnáth paused. “ Most true are your words. Hardly shall a woman with black care gnawing her vitals bear a stalwart son.”

Then Premnáth continued : “ But if a girl be born, then shall she be as a child of my own house. Thou hast said, Chaudhri, that I am generous to the poor and helpless, and I will not belie my reputation. For see, thy brother here saith, Our house is too poor, and we too helpless, to wed a daughter in fitting guise. The task shall then be mine. I will furnish the needed means, as alms in so good a cause, and all the cost of the wedding feast shall be borne by my house.”

Premnáth as he spoke fixed his eyes on the younger brother, and noted the gathering frown upon his brow, and the tightening of his lips. He had not to wait for a reply.

“ My lord,” he exclaimed, the expression of his indignation controlled by respect for his guest. “ Know, my lord, that never has our house received alms or aid in charity. What we spend is our own, and if a loan, then repaid with interest, though we starve. We are Chaudhris, my lord, men who live on their own—no beggars we ! For what we receive we make fair return, as between equals, man to man. Nay, then, my lord, to accept what you tender, would stain our honour, in our own esteem and among all our tribe no less.

“ But for the blessing you offer, that we crave may be granted ; and when the girl, if girl be born, shall reach marriageable age, she shall be provided for by us as becomes a daughter of our house.

“ Nay, nay, none shall dare say, that we took a bribe, even from the just Bábu Premnáth Sáhu of Ronáhi, to consent to rear a girl. She shall live, aye, and be cared for as a son, but from our own free choice, because we deem it right—and not otherwise.”

" Ah, my son," exclaimed his mother, " thou hast spoken as a man and as my own son ! "

" Good dame," said Premnáth, " the impulse of his own heart moved him aright. And now summon your daughter-in-law, and let her learn from her husband's lips that a girl-child shall be fostered no less than a boy. And when her mind has been set at rest, and then only, this venerable monk shall lay his hand upon her praying, that, if she bear a girl, she grow to be fair as Sitá and to marry a husband like Ráma. But if by God's will, a man-child be born, that he live to be a strong pillar of this ancient house, and follow righteous ways ! "

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST COLLOQUY

LONG before dawn the monk, leaving his companion asleep in the hall, went out to the cart-shed by the porch to watch for the first streak of light. Through a wakeful night he had been haunted by the vision of infants stifled ere they breathed the air into which they had been born to live ; the house was polluted until a new generation arose free from the ancestral guilt ; and he could not rest longer within the walls. As he crouched under his blanket against the cartwheel, he marvelled that he should have been unmoved by the abomination of this hoary practice until his conscience had been awakened by the stern rebukes and burning indignation of Premnáth. Had his self-centred contemplation and many years rendered him so obtuse that such inhumanity made no more impression upon him than the shifting shapes of floating clouds ?

Brooding thus he started on his way at dawn, leaving his companion to pay the last courtesies to the hosts on the village border.

"It would have been prudent to wait in the village until the day advanced and the sky cleared," said Premnáth in a tone of gentle remonstrance when he overtook the monk beyond the boundary stone.

"I could not remain in that house," replied the old man.

"You have lived so long in the south, that you have forgotten the cold drift of the rains of Mágh over our northern plains."

"Better the sharp edge of the wind of Mágh than the taint of a polluted house." And the old man shuddering turned

away to pursue the path in silence, and Premnáth followed preoccupied with thoughts of the events of the night.

He had been long cognisant of the practice against which he had so vigorously protested, and knew moreover that measures were being concerted by Government for its suppression ; but he had felt no active interest in the matter. How came it that he had suddenly blazed in passionate indignation against the crime ? Meditating over the question as he mechanically kept pace with the slow steps of his companion, he began to discern that he had acted as his beloved wife would have done : that he must have been inspired by her spirit ; that her spiritual influence dwelling in his heart had brought about the complete transformation in his mental attitude : the uncompromising anger had been hers ; he had merely given to it form and practical expression. How often in their common life he had shaped the means to the right end under the impulse from her pure heart ! Once more his beloved shared his life though vanished from the world of material things.

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But when the chill moaning wind bore down the driving rain, Premnáth, aroused from his reflections, became aware of the thin figure of his companion staggering over the slippery ground with shuffling feet, while the rain beat hard upon his legs unprotected by his short blanket. Looking round through the rain for shelter, he saw dimly at some distance from the track, the ruins of an ancient vaulted tomb, and taking the old man's arm led him thither across the fields. A narrow path winding among stunted date-palms, shrubs of prickly-plum and coarse spear grass, led to an arched entrance to a domed chamber, which, with its pigeon-haunted walls, afforded complete shelter from the wind and rain. In one corner, where the ground was cleared of debris, a fireplace had been constructed with two blocks of masonry, and the wall was blackened with smoke. Here the monk sank down shivering under his wet blanket. But Premnáth, having cast his own blanket over him, quickly gathered dry leaves, grass and twigs, produced a matchbox from his girdle and kindled

a fire. The flame leapt briskly, lighting up the dim walls. He piled on fuel until the fireplace was filled with glowing ashes and the masonry sides heated. Then he dried and warmed the old man's blanket, wrapped it over his back, and settled down beside him in front of the fire without speaking.

The monk had watched Premnâth's movements in silence, as a sick and languid child watches his nursing mother. At length, raising his hands to his brow and bowing over them, he said in a tone of profound respect : " Bâbuji, were I the teacher and you the pupil, I, the master, you the disciple, I could not be tended with more devotion."

" Bâbâji," replied Premnâth, "in this service my heart is eased."

" If indeed selfless aid kindly given to the weak be meritorious, then your desert is great before the Lord God."

' Do you doubt then that in kindness there is merit before God ? ' asked Premnâth.

Then the monk answered : " I have seen the weak perish uncared for, the strong grasping all good things, leaving to the weak what they themselves care not to possess."

" True," replied Premnâth. " Yet may a kindly action be most meritorious, as a pearl is precious, even from its rarity. True, the oppression of the weak by the strong and the innumerable sufferings of men, seem woven in the web of life. But, remember, the Divine Râma and the Lord Krishna were born in the flesh to do battle for justice and mercy against the foul fiends Râvan and Kans, and for the guidance of man : that each of us in his own sphere shall strive actively against evil things ; and none rest in abject submission, pleading from a weak heart that evils are the inevitable lot of life. In this persistent contest, no less than in pity for the afflicted, is drawn out to light the divinity in man."

A long pause intervened before the monk replied :

" Good master, since last night my thoughts have run ceaselessly on the way I have followed and on your dealings with the house of the Jâts.

" I have learnt and held that life is full of evil, that it is

verily of the essence of life, and that to struggle against it is a vain endeavour : the more or less in any one creature, of no measureable import compared to the unchangeable mass.

“ That through death is no escape from the evil things, but a transformation only of the shape in which misery is endured.

“ I have learnt that there is one way of release, one way only of Salvation : to cast loose every attachment to life ; to stifle desire as it is born, and thus dry up at the source the well-spring of individual life. For desire is the fuel of life, and life ceases as the fire vanishes when no longer fed.

“ And I have learnt that through Knowledge desire may be withered : through that Supreme Knowledge that all this varied world of sense is an appearance, an illusion, even as a vision or a dream.

“ And I have learnt, that this Supreme Knowledge can be grasped as a Living Truth only by one who has abandoned the world and, through intense meditation, pierced into the depths of his own soul, where under the troubled surface this Pearl of Truth lies hidden.

“ This I have held to be the Way of Salvation, and I have followed it since death loosed all my bonds in the world. I have sought one thing only, Salvation of mine own soul.

“ And I have looked on the miseries of men with indifference, never moved to give help ; for most surely does pity disturb the equanimity of the soul, a passion to be stifled at its first manifestation, as kindling afresh the fuel of life.

“ But see you now, brother, nay, my beloved, see, you whose bond to life has even now been snapped, whose joy in life has been turned to bitterness ; I, a helpless old man, had sunk down to perish beneath the storm ; but you supported my steps over this rough path, warmed me and brought me back to life, and lo ! this brief respite from death through your tender care comes to me now even as a boon as bestowed in love !

“ And before we part, my beloved, I open my heart that my perplexities may dwell in thy heart while thou livest, and perhaps aid thee on thy path.

“ Last night the women came with piteous tale of misery

and revelation of hidden crime, seeking from me but a trifling act. I heard their words unmoved, a tale of one of the countless miseries inevitable in life, differing from one another as yonder raindrops vary. I heard and was ready to grant their prayer and bid them begone to disturb me no more with their murmurings. And the sin would have run its course unchecked.

"But you, my beloved, struck in with resolute will, that the poisonous growth from ancient days might no more overshadow the house which had received us as honoured guests. And lo, your will has become the law of the house, even as the will of a god !

"And, my beloved, as I listened to your words, my mood no less than that of our hosts, was transformed. You revealed the iniquity perpetrated under the sanction of ancient usage ; by dexterous pleadings and moving appeals you won the support of the women ; by apt words addressed to the hearts and intellects and habits of the men, and by shadowed threats, you moved them to complete submission ; and as I followed intently all your winding way, a keen desire was born in my heart for your success, and I rejoiced at your conquest. The indifference of my soul was transformed to eager desire, and aroused to a loathing of the house wherein these sins against the holiness of life have been committed from generation to generation. Thus was I led away from the path of indifference which I have followed as the way of salvation, and even now I cannot feel that I have sinned.

"But hear me farther, for I speak now with vision exalted to see the ways my soul has followed. This change of mood was the final result of the precious words spoken by the gracious lady who departed yonder by the sea at the World's End, where the Lord Krishna abode in the flesh doing battle against the evils of an oppressed world. When all desire seemed dead, when I lived seeking nothing, desiring nothing, out of the embers a flame burst forth : a burning desire to visit once more the place where I had lived a blessed life in my home graced by wifely love. I knew not that I had strayed from the Path : her voice and words were benign.

" And see how far I have moved : the newly awakened desire was to seek my old home, for mine own heart's ease, nothing more ; but now I desire an end in which I have no concern, the extirpation of evil ; my impulse has become urgent to lessen sin in this world of sense—in which I have surely no concern. As pure of any selfish end as the desire of the Divine Ráma, was this last born desire of mine !

" And thus it stands in all its perplexity, my beloved : I, who followed the path that leads to abnegation of life through extinction of desire, have lived to desire passionately that evil cease from this world of Illusion, that life even here may be blessed as a divine gift. I had strangled Desire at its birth, and now behold, it lives ! "

Premnáth had listened to every word the old man spoke, looking in his face, eye to eye. He now turned aside, threw fuel on the fire, and the flames shot up, casting a red glow on the two figures in the twilight of the cavernous chamber. They watched the flames in silence, heard the sharp crackling of the twigs and leaves and the pattering of the rain outside. But the monk knew his companion was meditating on the theme he had set, and would answer in due time.

When the flames had subsided, the cinders glowed pale with intense heat, until the white ash gathering on the surface hid the glow beneath. Then Premnáth blew away the ash, exposing the red heart of the fire, and again threw on fuel, and under the dancing flames the aged features of the monk shone with colour and light, and his eyes sparkled as with inner heat.

Then at last Premnáth spoke : " See how the hidden fire breaks out with the wonted flame when on it the kindling fuel falls ! Energy hidden awhile to spring forth when fed by that for which it secretly craves. See how it dances in joy, like the Lord Siva the Dancer, when fed by the fuel the quickener of Life, and consenting never to death while a spark remains ! "

Then pausing awhile, he resumed in a quiet tone :

" Good father, I have heard the voice of the heart moved to speech through love and pity in fellowship with men.

"How should one absorbed in the salvation of his own soul, shut in by a hard shell against the emotions of his fellow men, having achieved indifference to an illusory world ; how should he respond to revelations of another soul's troubles, he who has cut away all the links of love ? To the self-centred soul of the anchorite, these pleadings of thy troubled heart are even as the pattering of the rain without, and the crackling of these twigs on the fire.

"Lo, good father, were I to turn upon thee a glassy eye set in an austere face gaunt under ascetic rule ; if I answered thee : Shall the calm of my soul be disturbed by these thy perplexities ? Leave me, I pray thee, alone to unbroken meditation on the way of salvation. If I replied thus, how bitter would be thy disappointment, that the beloved, to whom thou hast poured forth thy full heart, had sunk into that very state of Indifference, to which through so many years thou hast striven to discipline thy soul !

"And yet the fine-drawn reasons of thy Great Master spun in profound meditation on Knowing and Being as revealed in the holy Vedanta, would justify such a reply to thy appeal, however much it revolts the natural man.

"And here then the choice lies before thee, and before me :

"Follow the close-linked reasoning of the Great Master to its issue ; strip from the soul those deep affections which constitute the Brotherhood of Man ; reduce each soul to an isolated unit seeking only final absorption in Divine Being, Brahman ; and accept as the final result the dissolution of the social life of the world.

"Or, listen to the natural voices of the heart, speaking in tones that seem divine, and follow these to knit closer the bonds between man and man in mutual service and love.

"Such is the choice : this way or that ; one or the other the way of error and perdition.

"If these voices of the heart urging the claims of love are but lures of Illusion to draw men deeper into a pool of misery, which is life, then must the lonely soul seek oblivion from intolerable self-isolation. But if, as the soul cries from its depths, these voices are the manifestations of the Divine

Being whence all things spring ; then, however cogent and beyond refutation the doctrines of the Great Master may be or seem, they are demonstrably false, in so much as they condemn these most holy impulses as hindrances on the Way to Wisdom, and clash with reality in the living heart of the individual man.

" But it is not for me now once for all to make this great choice : to affirm that the teachings of your Great Master are a true revelation of Being, and the voices of Love deceptions ; or that these are divine and the doctrines a mere complex web of error, not worth the task of unravelling :

" But this I will say now, that the life of the one I have lost was the most divine manifestation I have known, even as the life of the Lord Ráma, and her life was one long manifestation of Love.

" And last night, when those anxious women came for help, I too listened at first with cold indifference ; but suddenly I grew warm with righteous anger against the abomination in the house. And now I know that her Spirit entered into me, prompted my feelings and inspired the words that I spoke.

" And know thou too, most perplexed anchoret of the cloister, that same spirit worked on thee at her feet by the sea in Holy Dwárka, and awoke again in thy withered heart the longing for the old home and the life of love with all thy folk. It has worked in thee as a ferment and at the end of a long life brought thee to this perplexity of spirit.

" And this then is my counsel to thee now : Wrestle not now against that Spirit of Love which hath moved us both ; yield to it, even as I last night, assured that no influence which emanated from that most holy life can be evil. Move onward now whither that spirit impelled thee to go, to thine old home yonder down by the river, to find satiation of thy last desire. But if thereafter, the light of thy Great Master's teaching shines clear as truth once more before thee, follow it ; but follow it knowing now how great is the sacrifice which strips life of glory and reduces it to noisome dust."

He ceased and side by side they sate in silence before the glowing embers.

At length the monk spoke in deliberate words : “ When all that to which my heart clung was gone, there remained dust and ashes of perished things. Love had vanished and all was void.

“ But now—ah, so late—the flower of life which is Love, has sprung again from the dry root, and once more shed grandeur and loveliness over the world.

“ But this new Love is wider, embracing a brotherhood of men ; and this all pervading Love can never perish away from life, for the impulse never ceases and the material is imperishable.

“ In the narrow household love it hath its first beginning ; in its final growth it hath become the holy bond between all living beings—those living now, and not less those who shall be born.

“ My beloved, the spirit of that Gracious Lady be guide to thee and me, and surely we shall reach the Goal. The way is hard, for that Spirit leads, not through meditation in the Cloister, but through arduous well-doing in the World.”

“ It is even so,” replied Premnáth. “ The task of our Saviour Ráma upon earth was to subdue evil things, not to meditate on the Divine Essence.”

“ For me,” said the monk, “ this call has come too late. My strength is spent.”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DEATH OF THE FRIAR

THEN the monk arose and standing over Premnáth said in an excited voice : " Let us go onward. My time is short. I may not reach the spot I long to see again ere I die."

But Premnáth taking him by the hand urged : " Nay, bide awhile. The rain drives slant under the bitter wind, and no shelter is there on this open plain."

He threw fresh fuel on the glowing embers. " Have patience, I beg. Time yet serves to reach the river-bank before night-fall."

The old man resumed his seat and fixed his eyes upon the fire. But soon he began to mutter and shift his feet restlessly ; and at length, unable to control his eagerness to reach his goal, he went to the doorway.

" No break in the clouds," he said. " I cannot rest. Do you remain in the shelter here. I know the way well, and can go alone."

" Good father," urged Premnáth, " you have lived so long in the warm south, that, as I said before, you have forgotten the keen edge of our winds of Mágh. Abide, I beg you ! "

" Good master," replied the monk, " I cannot endure this inaction longer. I am tortured by surging thoughts. I would struggle through the storm and benumb my mind, onward only to the hallowed place of rest."

Then Premnáth, seeing the suffering the old man endured, wrapped him in his own thick blanket well hooded over his head, and taking the monk's small blanket for himself, led the way out of the domed tomb.

The plain lay obscure under the driving rain. The monk's

steps, quick at first, became slow and feeble. To support him on the narrow path Premnâth walked through wet wheat reaching nearly to his knees. They proceeded thus a few hundred yards until they arrived at a boundary mark between four fields, striking the wide pathway downwards to Sardâr-nagar on the river. Here the old man suddenly staggered, and Premnâth endeavouring to support him, slipped in the mud, and they both fell to the ground. When Premnâth arose to his feet divested of his blanket, he found his companion lying prone, and breathing heavily. He tried in vain to arouse him. He felt his pulse: the beat was hardly perceptible; and the cold rain beat down on the almost naked body.

Then Premnâth having covered him with both blankets mounted the boundary stone to look round, but no creature was visible. He shouted for help, but no answer was returned from the rain-beaten solitude.

And now the thought flashed upon Premnâth: "This monk's end has come. Unconscious he will pass away without pain, if he be not already dead. If I remain here by him, I shall perish too."

He covered the body with the large blanket; again felt a the feebly beating pulse, and then gathering up his own staff and water-pot, turned to regain the shelter of the tomb. But he had gone only a few paces, when he was stopped by a voice from his heart: "Wilt thou abandon this old man, thy companion, when there is yet a spark of life within him, and still some hope that he may live to reach the hallowed spot for which his soul longed. How wilt thou answer for this dereliction?"

And he turned back in obedience to the voice of the higher law. He grew warmer from the inner impulse and felt his strength renewed. He wrapped the insensible man close in the blanket, and slowly bore him back to the shelter of the tomb, where he laid him down in front of the smouldering fire. The few leaves and twigs which still remained at hand soon kindled a bright flame, and his blanket hung over the entrance shut off the cold draught. He chafed the old man's sides and chest as he lay unconscious with eyes half-closed,

breathing heavily ; and continued the friction feverishly until the fire sank low. The dry fuel was exhausted, and he went outside to seek a fresh supply, but the fallen palm leaves and grass and twigs were now saturated, and thrown on they smothered the embers. He blew upon the fire until the acrid smoke choked him. He withdrew the curtain from the door, but the smoke still hung heavily on the ground : in his haste he had thrown on more damp fuel than the fire could kindle, and the wind had dropped and the rain changed to a dripping fog. Hardly enduring the thick reek he knelt down to draw the old man's head towards the door, and saw that the mouth was now gaping, the eyelids open and fixed. The pulse had ceased to beat.

" Gone ! gone ! " muttered Premnáth. " Baffled on the very eve of attaining the one last object for which he strove ! "

Then he crept outside into the damp fog to breathe and clear his lungs from the reek. And as he stood there, he discerned in the distance dark figures moving. He shouted and going forward saw a man leading a buffalo on which was seated a boy under a hooded blanket ; a village watchman taking a strayed buffalo to the police-station at Sardárnagar.

The boy was left to guard the corpse against jackals and wild dogs, and Premnáth taking his seat on the buffalo was borne exhausted to Sardárnagar.

BOOK THE FOURTH

THE RECLUSE

CHAPTER XXV

DWÁRKÁNÁTH AND THE MINSTREL

THE chill night of Mágh had closed in and the mist from the river valley spread over Ronáhi.

From the house of the banker came sounds of soft music, stealing through the mist like the aroma from a distant jasmine tree ; a secret music addressed to a little group silent and motionless around a rapt minstrel. A lady returning home from a visit preceded by a servant carrying a lantern, paused under the house-wall, until the music ceased, and then with a long-drawn sigh went silently on her way. But the servant woman whispered to her : “ That music is like the soft hand of a babe on the bosom at night, seeking his mother’s caress.”

In the Hall to the right of the main court, the lamps burnt brightly, and the veranda arches were closed in by quilted hangings to exclude the night air. On the cushioned dais was seated Dwárkánáth with his new friend, Rám Kīshan Dás, the Bangali postmaster, famed in private life for skill in playing the vina and his sweet singing of his native songs. Dwárkánáth leant against the pillow resting his head on his hands, while he listened with a rapt expression on his face, to the melody and the soft Bangali words of the song.

THE BANGALI MINSTREL’S SONG.

“ My work untouched, the hour so late,
At wayward neglect I repine ;—
Only the coming of Love I await,
To give to him all that is mine.

Not to usage and laws or wealth and estate,
Not to these will I freedom resign ;—
Always the coming of Love I await,
To give to him all that is mine.

The workers in scorn look on the gate,
Which bars the way to my shrine,—
Where silent the coming of Love I await,
To give to him all that is mine.

I heard their sharp call, but musing I sate]
And returned not a word or a sign ;—
Now the market is closed, and still I await
For Love to take all that is mine."

" Friend," said Dwárkánáth, when the last chords had sunk into silence. " Friend, I think none of our northern tongues melt with the music as does this eastern tongue of yours."

" Something depends on the mood of the listeners," replied his visitor, smiling. " But most on the setting of the words to the notes. In that song the words float on the melody as ripples on the surface of a lake."

" And the words ? " said Dwárkánáth, " I gathered their meaning imperfectly. Will you repeat and interpret them ? "

" Willingly," replied the singer. " And yet who can interpret a song into mere prose ? It vanishes with the rhythm of the verse. And as to the mere words of that song, they have no *rational* meaning—as we say in English, they are ' merely nonsense.' An emotion of yearning seeks in vain adequate expression in words which are fitted only for *rational* ideas. A translation into bare prose is like the anatomising of the body, it reveals a dead mechanism of nerves and muscles and bones from which the life has vanished. However, as you wish."

Then he recited the verses, translating line by line.

" You perceive," he said, " there is nothing in it but the craving of a sluggard for some undefined condition of life in which to dream away the passing hour unharassed by dull tasks, such for instance as making out accounts, filling columns of statistical returns, counting stamps and sealing up mail bags. But you may, if you prefer, consider the song to express

the aspirations of the soul for a higher life, the yearning for absorption in the Divinity—ends vague enough ! Or, if you are practical, you may think it expresses the longing of a lethargic fellow with a sluggish liver for an easy life without muscular or intellectual exertion."

The speaker's sceptical words not untinged by mockery jarred upon Dwárkánáth's nerves. The music and half-understood song had moved him deeply, and the translation had given an intellectual basis to the emotion and some material for the play of the imagination. After a pause he replied with some warmth : " True, the emotions are excited directly by the rhythm of the music and verse ; yet profound meditation on the meaning of the words alone will also reveal their implications, excite the imagination, and thus in the end arouse these very same emotions."

" Ah," replied his friend with a smile, " that is the way of the anchoret, who becomes intoxicated by the strain of meditation, as I by the music and song, and for both of us spring equally flowers of imagination. They penetrate no farther into things unknown, through their austerities, than I through music and song. But, poor fanatics, they believe that they are expatiating in the sphere of Pure Truth, while I, a practical fellow, know that I am roaming in regions of pure fancy only."

" But at least you admit," urged Dwárkánáth, " that through the gateway of poetry and music you pass into a region beyond ordinary experience."

" Well, yes," replied his friend. " Both ways lead to a sphere where imagination is free to range unchecked by reality. Heated by emotion, the imagination combines and recombines elements of actual experience into countless phantastic shapes, and these for visionary minds acquire the substance of realities. This 'sphere of visionary things' thus created is not only beyond the range of experience, but has no authentic existence outside the imagination.

" The fact is, my good friend, that in these speculations beyond the range of experience, I follow the school of John Locke and David Hume in its latest development through

Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer ; English sages who have done most to dissipate the mist of ancient visions."

"Of these sages, I know nothing," said Dwárkánáth, "not even their names."

"Probably your nephew, Bálgobind, has made acquaintance with them at his college," replied his friend. "Ask him when he comes home for the vacation."

"You shall draw him out," said Dwárkánáth. "But leave these dry discussions, and let me hear the song again. I shall enjoy the full effect now that I have mastered the ideas expressed in the words. Will you do so?"

"Most willingly. I too love that song."

Having tuned his instrument carefully and played a few chords, he repeated the song with enhanced skill and expression.

A prolonged silence followed, for both minstrel and listener lay under the spell of the mystic song. Dwárkánáth spoke first, slowly and in broken phrases striving for coherence.

"An untrammelled living—no limits of time and space—the soul released floats on the upper ether ; but not alone, united with a beloved being, one with the beloved, one and yet distinct ; soul mingled with soul in love ; the heart aching with a profound longing for this ineffable condition——"

Dwárkánáth paused, vainly seeking for words to express his feelings.

"I can perhaps help you to express what you mean," said his friend. "This profound longing for the ineffable, for the indeterminate something, this aching of the heart in an awful waste of separation, is the mystical shape assumed by the desire for complete union with the Beloved. It is the exalted emotion of physical love."

"There may be a certain likeness between the emotions," replied Dwárkánáth with hesitation ; "but the difference is not of degree only : the distinction between the spiritual and physical sides of our nature is involved."

"The ideas are too vague to admit of any definite expression," returned his friend. "For the ideas are 'mystical,' which really means that they cannot be defined by words."

Any terms which we can employ to describe them are of course inadequate for that which baffles definition."

"Not only inadequate," replied Dwárkánáth, "but even debasing."

"And yet only through such phrases have the mystics been able to express their ideas," replied his friend. "They all point to union with the Beloved as the ultimate goal of desire; and the root stock of all is the passion for a beloved woman, or, I would rather say, the desire of a woman for perfect union with the man she loves—the most profound of passions. And, when in rare cases indeed, mutual love has absorbed the self of each in another, and mutual reverence transformed each to a being more holy than self; then I think this worldly love does fairly represent the ineffable longing for spiritual coalescence which you, like others before you, seek in vain to describe in terms free from physical implications."

"I see you have studied and thought over these questions," said Dwárkánáth. "Perhaps then you have arrived at some rational explanation of these sublime feelings."

"At least I have endeavoured to find the origin of these religious emotions in empirical physiology; without any assumption of spiritual agencies, whose existence must be demonstrated before they can be recognised and used as causal agents at all. Explanation is, however, too strong a term for my merely provisional solution of the enigma.

"I see then in the physical nature of man two distinct sets of organs, the one directed to his own preservation, the other to the preservation of the race. Each of these is manifested in his consciousness by a different set of emotions, the one moving him to provide for his own needs, the other for the continuance of the race; the one essentially self-regarding, the other impelling him to the sacrifice of self for the sake of the race. Hence they are antagonistic, and the struggles in conscience between self and the claims of humanity are the manifestations of this antagonism. But the roots from which these two sets of emotions spring are in the structure and function of the physical organism.

"Now the highest expression in emotional consciousness of the organs provided for the preservation of the race, is Love. This has been sublimated by the poets and religious teachers until it seems severed completely from the physical root—even as a child when born is severed from his mother. Nevertheless, the root is there, but acting outside the range of consciousness, just as the root of the glorious lotus flower, hidden in the depth of the lake, is rooted in slime and mud. If the connection with the root is broken, the flower perishes.

"But the life of the race endures for ever through the ceaseless change of the constituent individuals. Hence the emotion of Love being concerned with an infinite future, transcends immeasurably the impulses of the individual directed to his own transitory pleasures and avoidance of pain.

"Thus then, very briefly stated, do I find some rational ground for Love, and vindicate through natural things his claims to predominance. You must bear in mind, however, that neither in this region, nor elsewhere in nature, is there any exact adjustment between the forces needed to maintain a perfect balance. Only in the mythical figures such as Ráma have we any approach to the exact equilibrium needed for the perfect performance of duties both to self and race.

"I could expand this theory in endless details through the night. But you must first recover from the shock it gives to your sublime aspirations directed to things spiritual and holy, and learn to look with reverence on the root of the greatest emotions, and of nearly all the lyrical poetry and mysticism of the world."

"Let me think for a while of this most material theory of yours," replied Dwárkánáth. "Meantime play some of your soft chords on the vina."

The minstrel touched the strings gently, and the music, hardly audible, became a stimulating accompaniment to Dwárkánáth's meditation. When he looked up as though about to speak, the music ceased.

"So much I understand," said Dwárkánáth, "that you find in the physical organs the root of the religious exaltation

which culminates in craving for union with the Divinity, that is with the Spiritual Beloved adorned by the ardent mind with the attributes of a Divine Being."

"Yes, such is the root and such is the final flower," said his friend. "And there is no self-sacrifice too great for Love when expanded to embrace the welfare of the Beloved, conceived under the form of a great brotherhood, living now and yet to be born to live in countless ages to come."

"But," continued Dwárkánáth, "to recur to your simile of the lotus flower; it indeed has its root fixed in the mud of the lake, but for its budding and blossom and final expansion in beauty, it needs the sun, light, and the air and moisture, and the many elements these hold in suspension and solution, and these even more than the matter absorbed by the root are the active agents in the growth of the flower on the surface of the lake. So it is with this theory of yours: you attribute exclusively to an earthly root that which is derived from another and spiritual sphere. We are conscious that a part of our nature has a higher origin: it flows from a spiritual source; it is a divine inspiration revealing a higher life, to which the purified spirit may hope to ascend. This is the source of Spiritual Love which transcends self, of the yearning for union with transcendent Being."

"Ah, my friend," replied Rám Kishan, "all these poetical phrases, 'spiritual sphere,' 'higher origin,' 'divine inspiration,' 'purified spirit,' all these entrancing elements with which we adorn the flower of life, are not realities within the range of our possible experience; but the graceful and delicate fictions in which the instinct of race—an instinct surely divine if anything can be fitly styled divine—clothes itself when it emerges upwards into the conscious mind."

"What I seek is to deal with these emotions as objects of physiological and psychological analysis; that is to find an explanation of them in our actual experience, without the unwarranted assumption of agents beyond possible experience; agents, which have been created indeed by the untutored imagination of our ancestors, and shaped as divinities, gods and dæmons, and disembodied spirits."

“ And as to the organic desire when sublimated in the conscious mind, I can conceive nothing more noble than this aspiration to subserve the Life of Man regarded as an ever moving progress towards perfection in this world which only we know. Those ‘ graceful and delicate fictions,’ to which you attribute a sublime origin, may indeed be usefully regarded as premonitions of this final goal. And let me point out one at least of the many consequences of my hypothesis : it destroys the asceticism of the Yoga system at its root ; for the efforts to acquire ‘ mystical ’ power for self, to achieve salvation of self through mortifications of the body and suppression of desire ; for these it substitutes endeavours directed to an end transcending self, to the augmentation and enhancement of the Life of Man and his beatification in this visible tangible world. Surely a most sublime end.

“ But now, the hour has struck : the night mails are due at my office ; and I would ask your permission to depart.”

“ Is there not time left for one more of your songs,” said Dwárkánáth.

“ One more then,” replied his friend, “ and I will sing one which is in accord with the spirit of my speculations.”

I

The anchoret’s cell is not for me—
And in bonds of joy I still am free,
Embraced in the arms of Liberty.

She chargeth my earthen cup with wine,
Anew, in each of the draughts divine,
The fragrance and hue and taste combine.

A myriad lamps in my world shall flame
At her fire enkindled ; and in my name
Be lit to exalt her altar’s fame.

My heart shall be open to each delight
That springs from hearing, touch or sight,
Let it pause therein or pass in flight.

My illusions—let them blaze as fire
With the joy that ardent hopes inspire,
And my Love be the fruit of ripe desire !

II

'Mid the countless forms that pause and run
To vanish from vision beneath our sun,
I have caught a glimpse of the Formless One.

But ere I take leave of this dædal earth,
I would know the things and test their worth,
We meet on the way to death from birth.

And this lotus afloat on the ocean of light
Hath yielded me honey exquisite,
And grateful I face the region of night.

If death be the end—I have played my part,
Seen glorious things that filled my heart
With love of my world ;—so let me depart.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE BEREAVED HOUSE

WHEN his friend had taken leave Dwárkánáth leant back against the pillow, resting his head on his right arm. His pulses beat quickly under the excitement of the strange debate and the music and song ; the throbbing and singing in his ears, sensible in the stillness of the winter night, beat time to the refrain :—

“ Only the coming of Love I await,
To give to him all that is mine.”

In his dream-like reverie there arose with extraordinary vividness the figure of the Pátar singer and dancer as he had seen her at the house of his friend in Háfizganj ; her graceful movements in the dance, the swaying of her voluminous skirts, her right arm outstretched and head bent over her shoulder to display the round neck, the flash of her eyes, the fine outlines of her face, all shown under the red glare of the torchlight. Her passionate song then rang in his ears, sweeping away the echo of the music to which he had just listened so intently. But quickly the vision faded away, leaving an inexpressible longing behind.

Ever since he had witnessed the too brief performance of this accomplished artist, an ardent desire to see her again had nestled in his heart. But he dared not expose himself to a temptation he felt he could not resist : he distrusted his power of self-control, as he had frankly confessed to his father when advising him not to abandon the household. All this was now forgotten, and his ardent imagination ranged unchecked until his heart ached with longing for this most fascinating of women. The soft sentimentalist from Bengal

might await the coming of his ideal Love to surrender all in her lap; but men of the north sought out their loves and captured them. Why should he, now free and his own master, forgo this most exquisite companionship?

“ Ere thou art rapt from this dædal earth,
Thou shalt gather those things of infinite worth
That are strewn on the path to death from birth.”

How could he bestow his wealth better than in the purchase of this most precious jewel to adorn the girdle of his life?

Thought followed thought rapidly through his excited mind, until his longing passed into resolution for action. He would go in pursuit of the actress, now without delay. It was full time he gave some entertainment in return for the many he had shared. The dull old house should ring with festive voices and music. He saw the spacious courtyard illuminated beneath the great red and white canopy; himself the genial and generous host receiving all the gentry of the countryside, envied as the one by whose command this consummate artist fascinated the crowd.

He sprung from his seat, summoned his servant, and bade him order his light bullock chariot to be ready to start at four in the morning for Háfizganj.

It was now nearly midnight; but his brain was too excited for sleep, and many things must be disposed of before his departure. He sent for his head clerk to attend on urgent business, and while waiting for his appearance thought rapidly over arrangements and orders needed for the disposal of business. The dulness and lassitude, which had oppressed him for some days, were dissipated: he felt the exhilaration of one about to be released from long and irksome restraint. When the old Muním, Bihári Lál, appeared—wrapped in quilted garments and surly at being summoned at midnight—Dwárkánáth felt a new sense of power; he saw the needs of the moment clearly, and gave brief and peremptory instructions, dominating the old retainer by his masterful energy. Bihári Lál ceased to demur and make suggestions, and when the work was complete left puzzled by the transformation of his leisurely master into a man of resolution and energy.

Dwárkánáth gave orders that the ladies of the family, now asleep in their apartments, should be undisturbed when the chariot came round. He wished to avoid his wife, a plain, dull, insipid woman, who had nothing to say to him, and no sympathy with his interests. She would be told that urgent business had called him to the headquarters of the district, and that the date of his return was uncertain.

His preparations being complete, he lay down in the lighted hall to await the hour of departure, and still in excited mood thought out a plan of the great entertainment at which the singer was to display her talents. Perhaps, he reflected further, he might discover her present residence, and at once enjoy her society in Delhi or Lahor or anywhere convenient. He need not hurry back to business and this dull house.

Thus his excited mind ran on without pause until two hours before sunrise the tinkle of the ox-bells sounded from the stall adjoining the house. He lifted the curtain at once to the courtyard where a couple of dim oil-lamps were burning, and heard the rumble of wheels and the movements of Jánki, the doorkeeper, unbarring the gate. At the same time the door of the inner apartments creaked, and a woman bearing a lantern came towards him from the arcade. It was the widow Har Sundari.

"Brother," she said, "I heard you were leaving suddenly——"

"I did not wish of you to be disturbed," interrupted Dwárkánáth irritably.

"Have you received any news from your father?" she asked. "I was anxious——"

"None," he answered. "Why were you anxious?"

"I have been haunted by a strange feeling;—I awoke oppressed by some great calamity; I know not what. I could recall no dream. This was yesterday night, and through the day a vague anxiety has possessed me."

But Dwárkánáth interrupted her impatiently: "Sinking of the stomach, palpitations of the heart from hasty feeding after a fast: common enough. But I cannot stay chattering.

Bid adieu for me to Tára Muni and the rest. I have business in Háfizganj this morning. What a cold night to have to travel ! I need all my wraps."

The wicket in the great folding-doors of the archway was now thrown open, and Dwárkánáth hurried down the passage eager to depart. But as he was about to pass out a man came forward bearing a red envelope with a receipt attached to it, which he handed to Dwárkánáth, explaining that the post-master thought he might be glad to receive at once this telegram sent on in the mailbag from Háfizganj.

" Ah, thank the Bábu Sáhib," said Dwárkánáth hurriedly, signing the receipt. " It was a kindly thought of him to send it on."

He was proceeding to take his seat in the chariot without opening the cover, but the widow had followed him.

" Will you not read the message before you go ? " she said timidly.

Thus checked, he stood by the chariot lamp and tore open the cover. But the message was written in English.

" I read ' Porbandar,' " he said ; " but the rest I cannot decipher."

" Porbandar ! " exclaimed Har Sundari. " The harbour near Dwárka. Oh, let me call Gobinda. He will read it."

" Unlucky officiousness ! " muttered Dwárkánáth. " The Bábu might have waited till morning ! " But returning to the house with the widow : " Wake the boy sharp," he said. " I cannot be delayed." And he waited impatiently under the lamp in the courtyard, while she ran in to fetch the boy.

" Wake up, Gobinda ; wake up ! " he called fretfully to his son. And when Gobind Prasád, a boy of twelve, came out half-dazed, wrapped in his bed-quilt, he shook him by the shoulder.

" Gather your wits, my son, gather your wits," he said. " Show your learning by reading this telegram."

The boy went close under the lamp, and slowly, letter by letter, deciphered the message. It was despatched from

Porbandar on the previous morning by Parkotam the family priest :

“ Our revered mistress died on Sunday at midday, at Holy Dwárka.”

“ Ahi, ahi ! ” cried the boy, when he at last grasped the full meaning. “ Dead, father, dead ; our beloved grandmother ! ”

“ What ? ” exclaimed his father. “ Do you read aright ? What are the words ? ”

In a broken voice the boy read and translated the message word by word, and then dropping the paper, threw himself sobbing into the widow’s arms and cried : “ Our dear, dear grandam ! Gone ! Gone for ever ! ”

“ Hush, hush,” said the widow, gently pressing him to her bosom.

Dwárkánáth stood stunned and motionless, and then picking up the fallen paper, endeavoured to spell out the written words.

The bustle and cries of the boy had now awakened the family, and Dwárkánáth’s wife Tára Muni hurried out, followed by Indráin with her crying babe, and the three younger children of Dwárkánáth.

“ Dead ! dead ! our dear grandam dead,” wailed the boy Gobinda. “ On Sunday at noon, far away by the sea at Dwárka ! ”

The house was filled with women’s wailing, and Dwárkánáth stood in the midst rigid, with the fatal message crumpled in his hand, while his sobbing wife clung to him. The main pillar of the house was snatched away, and it seemed the whole fabric must collapse. She, the centre round which the family life clustered, had vanished, leaving the household drifting they knew not whither.

But the widow, Har Sundari, gently pushed aside the boy, who still clung to her, and laying her hand upon Dwárkánáth’s shoulder :

“ Brother,” she said, “ we must act. How can we help our father ? He is heart-broken among strangers.”

"What help?" replied Dwárkánáth vaguely. "The pandit is with him. See, he sends the message. The servants are with him, all trusty."

"Come into the hall to the light," she said, taking his arm. "Jánki, bid Baldeva await with the carriage for orders and close the gate. Come, brother."

At a sign from her, Indráin withdrew with her crying babe and the children, leaving the bewildered Dwárkánáth and his wife to follow into the hall. The lamps were still burning there, and the air warm and heavy with the fumes of tobacco and scent of the fruits and sweetmeats left on the trays.

Dwárkánáth sank down on the pillows and burying his face in his hands tried to realise what had happened, while his wife and sister-in-law sate in silence watching him.

"Sister," he said at last, looking up, "but for your ominous words I should have left beyond recall before the message was delivered. On Sunday at midday, and now, on Thursday morning, at last we learn our loss."

Then the widow answered: "For three days my heart has been filled with anxiety! Surely her spirit came upon me to-night."

"Her last thoughts were surely of the home she loved, and hither her spirit would fly," said Dwárkánáth dreamily.

"Ah, why did she leave us?" murmured Tára Muni. "The guardian of all!"

"But listen now, brother," said the widow. "Let us decide what to do! Your father would wish to have you near him. The carriage is ready. Go, I pray, at once to Háfizganj and send a telegram to Dwárka."

But he shook his head. "What use? Dwárka town is at least fifty miles from the nearest telegraph office at Porbandar."

"Say you will meet him wherever he wishes and bring him home," pursued the widow. "Wait for his answer at Háfizganj."

"What use?" replied Dwárkánáth. "It will take eight days for a reply to reach us. Meantime we shall have a letter from the pandit or from my father himself."

“Then go yourself direct to your father at Dwárka,” she exclaimed. “He must need your comfort and help.”

He shook his head : “How can I leave the bank when great transactions are pending ? ”

“Then do this,” she urged eagerly. “Telegraph to my son at Benáres. Bid him start at once to join his grandfather at Dwárka, or wherever he can find him. Who knows but the broken old man may wander away alone on some pilgrim-path and be lost ? ”

Dwárkánáth seized upon this suggestion : “Aye, sister, that is good counsel. Yes, I will telegraph to Bálgobind, and advise my father that the boy is coming to him and that I await his orders at Háfizganj. Yes, yes, all is ready. I will leave at once. Ho, Jánki, there ! Is the chariot ready ? Bid Baldeva drive me swiftly to Háfizganj to the house of Lála Chadami Lál, the Treasurer.”

He had leapt to his feet, eager to be moving and escape from the house of tearful wailing women and the ceremonies of mourning. Bidding hasty adieu to his wife and sister, he hurried out of the house ; and breathed freely when the chariot bore him smoothly down to the bridge lighted by the first rays of morning.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DIRGE

THE two women remained seated in the lighted hall with their heads bowed over their knees, moaning softly. Indráin soon joined them there, having soothed her crying babe to sleep, and after her, Tárá Muni's four children, led by the young scholar Gobinda, crept in to crouch together in awe-stricken silence.

The young wife, Indráin, was the first to break silence, moaning to her mother-in-law :

" Oh, that my beloved were here that I might weep on his breast ! "

" Sister, sister," cried Tárá Muni to the widow, " all night She sat by this little one of mine in his fever, and under Her hand his wandering mind grew calm."

Indráin. O mother, never shall Her hand calm my hasty temper. Ahi, ahi.

Har Sundari. There was a spell in her voice and the touch of her hand to still the restless heart and shed repose on the fevered brain ; and who her equal to inspire courage to endure ?

Tárá Muni. When I was sad and wept, She banished the shadow and the light was restored between me and mine.

Indráin. O mother, mother ! And there was laughter in Her eyes, and always happy words on Her tongue.

Tárá Muni. Aye, little daughter, who so bright to lead our laughter when at eve we gathered about Her with our little ones.

Har Sundari. Years lay light upon Her brave spirit.

Indráin. Gone all the sweet fancies of Her wondrous tales !

Tára Muni. And the men, all stern and unyielding ;—who shall make gentle their ways ?

Har Sundari. Still shall Her spirit rule them to tenderness.

Tára Muni. A little while only, I fear.

Har Sundari. Forty years She ruled this house in Her way, and this same way shall endure while we live. Each and all, we cherish Her words and wishes as of a spirit holy—most holy—within these four walls. As these live in our hearts, so in the hearts of the men—husband and son and grandson, and they too shall say, thus She would have wished it, thus shall it be. Not with Her passing, shall vanish the wise and loving spirit which swayed their lives.

Tára Muni. Ah, sister, men are wayward and readily harsh to the women they rule ; such is their inmost nature. Only by such a spirit as Hers are they subdued to ways of gentleness ;—and now I fear their nature will assert itself.—Ahi, ahi, I fear, I fear.

Indráin. The rebuke of Her glance was enough—harsh words died on the lips.

Har Sundari. Her blessed Spirit shall dwell in our hearts, our memory ever fresh of Her wisdom and goodness and love, moulding our thoughts and our words, guiding our ways. Thus shall it pass on to the men, husband and son and grandsons. The Light of the House shall glow, if less bright, as in those happy days when the gentle hand trimmed lamps at twilight with murmured prayers.

Síta hath passed away, and her Lord Ráma, yet they are ever with us, speaking through our poet Tulsi ;—their loyal hearts, their words of unfading wisdom, their noble and gentle ways. So shall abide with us our dear mother : in this household She shall not cease to inspire and guide until the last of us is borne away on the bier, from this home made holy by Her blessed rule !

CHAPTER XXVIII

DWÁRKÁNÁTH DELIVERED

DWÁRKÁNÁTH passed six days with his friend Lála Chadami Lál awaiting the reply from his father. He was much depressed, took little nourishment and never left the house. But under the cloud of his sorrow, there still glimmered his heart's desire for the woman of Rámgarh, whom his ardent imagination had transformed into a type of ideal delight.

At length, on the seventh day, the reply arrived, despatched on the tenth day after the death of Rádika : it informed him that his father was embarking for Bombay, whence he proposed to return home direct ; and bade him await his arrival in Ronáhi, and recall Bálgobind. He handed the message to his friend Chadami Lál, who had just returned home from the Court House.

"Dated the day before yesterday at Dwárka," remarked his friend. "Say he left on the same day by the boat from Dwárka, after completing the ceremonies of the Tenth. Let us calculate when we may expect him here if he travels through without breaking his journey."

Dwárkánáth was at once interested in the problem. An acquaintance who had travelled through the Kathiáwár country was summoned, and with his assistance they worked out the route and calculated the time required for the journey, with the result that at least eight days must elapse before Premnáth's arrival and that he would probably delay a day or two at both Bombay and Prág.

"So," said Chadami Lál, when the neighbour had departed, "you have a long week to dispose of before your father can possibly arrive."

"I have done all my business here, so I suppose I had better return home," replied Dwárkánáth.

"You speak dolefully of returning," remarked his friend, smiling.

"In truth I am little inclined for a household of sorrowing women," replied Dwárkánáth. "A man clenches his teeth, fixes his face, and suffers in silence. But the women will speak in suppressed tones, sigh and groan under their breath, and our once cheerful house be thick with gloom."

"Perhaps. Still when the old mother-in-law in due course leaves her place to her natural successor, the younger women and the new ruler are soon consoled."

"That is true generally," replied Dwárkánáth, "and I suppose most of us are not unconscious of a certain relief upon the removal of one who has dominated us, even though he was very dear. But our house is a notable exception. My mother's was a rule of love and wisdom. Our women are simple affectionate folk, and they accepted her guidance like happy children. She read their thoughts, shared their feelings and could find words to express them more readily than they themselves. But, as it stands now, I can bring no relief to their sorrow, and their tearful eyes will cast a thicker gloom on me."

"Then give me your company," said his friend. "I have had little of it for the last week."

"I confess, I have been a gloomy guest, but your friendship will make allowances for my depression. In the past we have had many and merry times together."

"We will surpass them in the future," replied his friend heartily. "Life and the living will resume their prerogatives."

"You put it well," answered Dwárkánáth quickly. "Shall the blight of death fall on the flower of life? Better to die outright than wither away under grief."

"You speak like your old self. Then, you will stay on with me?"

"I know not," replied Dwárkánáth doubtfully. "Perhaps I might aid the women to endure their calamity, and persuade them to follow the daily round with brave faces at least, faces

worn as a mask at first, yet soon to become the expression of recovered life."

"Are you then so strong yourself that you can impress them with your own bravery? Nay, I rather see you infected by them, sobbing in sympathy, and with your sighs kindling afresh the waning grief of the women, as the embers of a fire with the rising wind."

"I am not so easily impressed as you imply."

His friend smiled: "Your soul is not perhaps the surface of a lake, changing light and colour with the sky and air; nevertheless, it is responsive to your company. Take then my advice, and stay here. We will discourse of cheerful things and business matters; meanwhile the women's grief will grow calm, and you better fitted to cheer them when you return."

"Perhaps," said Dwárkánáth, "it would be prudent to wait for a message from Bál gobind."

"He may have overtaken the old man."

"And my father's plans may change."

"Possibly," suggested Chadami Lál, "when he reaches Bombay he may decide to go south, to Sri Rangam and Rameshwar Rám. Better a long pilgrimage as remedy for a sore heart than return to the desolate home."

"True," replied Dwárkánáth. "You are a wise counsellor. If then I might trespass further on your hospitality?"

"Most welcome when you abide longest. So now cast off, for a few hours at least, this shadow of bereavement and answer the call of the passing day."

Dwárkánáth smiled sadly.

"I speak as a wise physician," continued his friend. "As friction keeps the flesh wound raw, so doth brooding on the soul's grief. For distraction, nothing is better than work, and I have promising schemes I wish to discuss with you, now that you are master of the old firm and will be alert to expand the business. Good relief, too, is offered by the gaming table; for the moment we forget everything but the chance of the throw. To-night we will make up a party, and amid the excitement your troubles shall be forgotten. I wish, too, we

had a songstress here to fan the fire of passion latent in the poet's words. I remember well how fascinated you were by that singer from the Rámgarh school, who once performed in this courtyard."

"I never witnessed her equal," exclaimed Dwárkánáth with sudden animation.

"Indeed! Well, tastes differ, and each adorns his own choice. Nay, of these fascinators none so plain but she has some impassioned follower! And I grant they cast a glamour alluring even sober men."

"And dangerous, perhaps."

"Yes, the lamp and the moth," said his friend, laughing.

"A joy brief but intense——"

"Which may live in the memory a priceless treasure for aye," added his friend, interrupting.

"That also," exclaimed Dwárkánáth. "And though one perish swift as the moth in the flame, nothing can annihilate the joy as a priceless moment in the circle of being." Then pausing he continued in a low earnest tone: "My friend, that girl's voice and figure have haunted me ever since. Listen! It was on the very night when the news came from Dwárka. I know not how or why, a passionate longing overcame me. I resolved to search for her at once—that very night—and even as I prepared to depart before dawn, that message came!"

"Strange indeed!"

"As though a cover, which damped down hidden embers of passion, was suddenly lifted and a flame leapt upwards!"

"And now?" asked his friend.

"I know not. And yet, I would I knew where she sojourns."

"Ah yes," remarked his friend with a sarcastic smile, "just as we are all curious of the movements of princes and nobles, with whom we have no concern. But if you really want news of her, our ingenious friend Fakírchand could no doubt give it."

"I had thought of him," replied Dwárkánáth. "He it was discovered her on his visit to Sáhu Moti Lál at Almora. But he is away from home."

"He was to have returned to-day," said his friend. "If so, he will join our party to-night."

"That is well. He is a fellow of elegant tastes and sprightly wit——"

"But his cool sense never permits these pleasant qualities to hinder his business," added Chadami Lál, laughing. "Still good company in the hours of ease!"

As he spoke the doorkeeper entered to announce Lála Fakírchand himself, and was followed by a man of about thirty, slim of figure, with sharp features set in a thick crisp beard of glossy black and lit up by keen restless eyes.

"I learnt you were here," said the visitor, addressing Dwárkánáth, when the warm greetings of intimates had been exchanged, and he had taken his seat on the carpet. "I heard, too, of your bereavement and wished to express my sympathy."

"It was kindly, Lála," replied Dwárkánáth, conscious of a shock at this recall to his grief from the bright anticipations into which he had floated. "A severe affliction has fallen upon our house, but the sympathy of old friends brings some alleviation."

Fakírchand was not one before whom he was inclined to expatiate on his grief. When therefore formal condolences had been given and received, a pause ensued, and Chadami Lál, to break through the constraint, intervened addressing his visitor :

"Your name was on our lips the very moment you were announced."

"I would be present in your thoughts though absent," replied Fakírchand, smiling. "And you know the couplet :

"'Tis sweet when on the way to a friend
You meet him coming to you."

"Yes, surely," replied Chadami Lál, and continued, "We were recalling a personage you once presented to our friend."

"What, the eloquent Gadádhar, the Swan among preachers?"

"Hardly," replied Chadami Lál, laughing. "No such

austerity. No, the graceful dancer and dulcet singer from Almora."

"Oh, she," said Fakírchand, nodding to Dwárkánáth. "Yes, a clever graceful wench. She was then like a kokla bird with plumage fresh from her native hills and a mellow throat unrasped by straining in great assemblies. Limited truly in range and volume, yet very mellow within the compass."

"You are always critical," said Dwarkánáth. "As for me, I never saw or heard one who gave me equal delight."

"Ah, yes," replied Fakírchand, "I remember now, you would have had me recall her again and again, and so disarrange my carefully prepared programme."

"Our friend has been haunted by visions of her," said Chadami Lál, laughing. "Ever in the twilight at dawn and eve in his prayers. And now, to make sure she is of earth and no minstrel of the upper air, he is anxious to discover where she tarries."

"So then lies the matter!" returned Fakírchand. "In his fancy the graceful creature has been transformed into a visitor from the æther, an astral spirit embodied for a brief hour to charm, and then to vanish! Nay then, I can satisfy you, my friend; flesh and blood of the warmest and still sojourning on earth; for only three days ago I had news of her."

"Where? from whom?" demanded Dwárkánáth eagerly.

"Where? - In Ambálá. From whom? From Bábu Hira Singh."

"The Diwán of the Rája of Kapurthala?"

"The same."

"And what did you hear?"

"She had been performing at an entertainment in the city, and was just leaving for Mathura, to take part in the festivities of a great wedding."

"Then she is on her way now?"

"I doubt not. She travels by easy stages from place to place."

"On Tuesday next the marriage feast will be held; I received an invitation," said Dwárkánáth thoughtfully.

"Does the phantom of your twilight mood now take a material shape?" asked Fakírchand, smiling sarcastically.

"Solid enough; solid enough!" replied Dwárkánáth.

"Had you been able to attend at the wedding you might have been taken captive, so perhaps it is well obstacles arose," and Fakírchand repeated some Persian lines laughing.

But Dwárkánáth had become grave, giving no response to the gay tone. And Fakírchand, delicately sensitive to his friend's mood, abandoned the subject to address Chadami Lál on other matters, and ere long arose to take leave, promising to join the card party that night.

Dwárkánáth sat long in silent thought.

"A dark cloud has settled upon you," said Chadami Lál.

"Rather a vision of light," replied Dwárkánáth, "manifested just as on the night of which I spoke."

"Explain."

"Strange," said Dwárkánáth. "Am I crazed, that seated here amid the things of the vulgar day, I see shapes beyond the range of eye, and hear voices remote from the most sensitive ear; a sign to my spirit from a spirit afar? But I heard the tinkle of the ox-bells of her chariot, saw her seated with the curtain raised, laughing as she looked towards me, driven down the wide road between the avenue, and behind her the sun was setting, just as it is setting now. Her eyes were turned on me with a saucy challenge. Then in the dust reddened with the evening light her chariot and little retinue vanished."

"But, my good friend," said Chadami Lál seriously, "sane men do not *see* these distant things."

"I am sane, and I have seen them," answered Dwárkánáth quickly.

"The tinkle of the ox-bell in the lane excited the vision, while you were musing, as on the verge of sleep. Common enough; but we don't *see* these things."

"Explain it as you please," replied Dwárkánáth. "My experience is not communicable to the sceptic."

"Truly," returned his friend, smiling, "such visions are only revealed to believers, or what is much the same, to

earnest inquirers into mysteries. But apart from these fancies, you have now learnt what you sought. What next ? ”

“ Our game to-night will clear my head of mist.”

“ And sharpen your wits,” added Chadami Lál. “ The penalty for slow wits and wandering thoughts swiftly overtakes the gamester.”

And thus it befell Dwárkánáth that night ; his mind wandered obsessed by the vision, and when, long after midnight, he arose from the game, he had lost heavily, chiefly to Fakírchand, a cool imperturbable gamester, who enjoyed the play on either issue, whether winning or losing.

During the brief remainder of the night until the dawn broke, Dwárkánáth had no rest. He thought of the vision as a summons to act, to seize a fugitive chance that would never recur ; unless he intercepted the dancer on her way to the Seth’s festival, he would lose her for ever. Should he be held back by a scruple of mere antiquated propriety, and then regret all his life his lack of spirit ?

In the morning the telegrams from his nephew Bál gobind came, stating he had arrived at Dwárka two days after his grandfather’s departure by steamer for Bombay, and would himself return direct to Benáres to resume his interrupted studies.

Dwárkánáth now felt himself free : he could proceed to the wedding feast at Mathura and return to Ronáhi before his father’s arrival.

He departed at once.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PILGRIM'S RETURN

DWÁRKĀNĀTH intercepted the actress, with her retinue, on the high road from Delhi to Mathura, and enjoyed five days of her fascinating society before a despatch from his clerk brought the news that the family priest, with the servants, had arrived, and that his father was following from Sháhgarh as a pilgrim on foot. Then his excited imagination called up a painful vision of his old father, footsore, weary and heart-broken, returning to his desolated home, to find that his only son, his rightful comforter in affliction, had departed, none knew why or whither, heartlessly abandoning the house of sorrow. Shame and remorse seized him. He broke away from the allurements which had encompassed him as a spell, and after thirty-six hours of unbroken travel arrived at the house of his friend Chadami Lál, where, to his profound relief, he learnt that his father had not yet passed through on his way to Ronáhi.

He now breathed freely, and his mood changed. He felt that by his swift response to the call of duty he had expiated the sin of his chase of the dancer during the season of family mourning ; and his self-esteem was much enhanced when he reflected further on the quick apprehension and resolution he had displayed not only in the pursuit, capture, but also in his prompt return ; and the warm congratulations of his friend confirmed him in his self-complacency and filled him with vanity to the brim.

But again the prospect of the gloomy household at Ronáhi depressed him ; and he shrank from meeting his wife, the plain faded dull woman, for whom his slowly increasing repugnance now became so strong that he shuddered at the thought

of her touch. He remained in Háfizganj—as though he had come down there to await his father's arrival ; and through the night he enjoyed the congenial society and the welcome distractions of the gaming-table.

In the morning he had paused at the temple gateway after bathing, and stood idly watching the country carts as they passed slowly towards the town, when he heard his name called in a familiar voice, and beheld his father reclined in the tail of a cart between bales of unpressed cotton. The white hair had sprouted thickly over his shaven face and head, his features were haggard, his eyes bloodshot and feverish.

Dwárkánáth sprang forward impulsively, and his father threw his arms round his neck, exclaiming in a weak voice, " My son, my son ! "

" Your hands are burning ; you look sick and broken ! " exclaimed Dwárkánáth with emotion.

" My pilgrimage is over, my son. To-night I will rest in my home."

" We will first go to Chadami Lál's," replied his son, and gave orders to the carter. Then, full of sympathy, he followed, holding his father's hand and speaking words of comfort and affection.

But Premnáth insisted on proceeding homeward without delay. He felt he was in the first stage of some serious disorder, and was haunted by dread that he too, like the monk, might die before he reached the shrine of his most holy memories. The carriage and horses of Thákur Bharat Singh were borrowed, and within four hours of his arrival in Háfizganj the sick man and his son drove away in the easy-running barouche over the metalled road to Ronáhi.

Premnáth had hoped to return home in the humble guise of a pilgrim approaching the shrine of his divinity ; he arrived in the state carriage of his most wealthy client, the great Thákur landholder of Tikori.

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The ladies of the household, alarmed at his embarrassed breathing and the acute pain in his side, hastily summoned

the Hindu *baid* or physician, but Dwárkánáth, muttering that the family priest and the women might join the *baid* in any prayers and spells they pleased, but his father's medical treatment should be in the hands he himself trusted—sent for Muhammad Bakhsh, the native doctor in charge of the Government hospital.

Meantime Premnáth lay upon his couch, still and silent, desiring nothing but to rest undisturbed, conscious of a hardly acknowledged hope that he might now pass in quiet from life and its solitude. He listened with subdued interest to the eager protestations of Tára Muni against her husband's obstinacy in calling in the Mohammedan doctor, instead of their hereditary Brahman physician : it was sinful. He heard the voice of the young wife Indráin interposing, that her husband had once said that if *she* were seriously ill he would certainly call in one of the English doctors to attend her ; and to this the sharp reply of Tára Muni, that evidently the young student's head was turned with his new learning ; and the widow urging that her son had seen much of the new ways and could judge of them against the old, knowing both. He listened placidly to this as to a scene in a play with which he had no personal concern.

But when the native doctor came and questioned him cheerfully, examined him with gentle hand, took his temperature, applied his stethoscope, he became interested in the careful methods adopted to diagnose his case. The man's quiet manners and simple sincere character had always attracted him, and now he was pleased to have him by his bedside, and to submit without any wish himself to influence the issue ; for his energy had subsided towards the zero point.

The doctor found his patient suffering from acute pleurisy, which he hoped, with the help of the ordinary treatment and careful nursing, would pass off in eight or ten days, but he suggested that Dwárkánáth should invite the English civil surgeon to come over from Háfizganj to confirm or correct the diagnosis.

The patient passed the night in the twilight between sleeping and waking, conscious of the presence of the widow ever watch-

ful to adjust his coverlet and pillows ; and strangely comforted that he was sinking into oblivion never more to awake to the insatiable longing for his lost wife. He had reached the goal exhausted, and now would pass peacefully away.

When soon after dawn the native doctor came to adjust the bandages and poultice over his side, he was interested to learn that the English doctor from Háfizganj might be expected to arrive by the first watch of the day ; but his interest was regarding the arrangements made for the gentleman's reception ; that the Pathán nobleman, Khán Bahádur Khán, had sent round at dawn to inquire after the patient's state, and to inform them that he would entertain the English doctor at the mansion by the river, where breakfast awaited him. He felt, too, an obscure gratification in hearing that the Tahsildár and other notables of the town had come round personally, proffering sympathy with the sick man and the bereaved household.

He was aroused to fresh energy when the English doctor was announced. He humorously expressed his gratification that an occasion had arisen which brought so honoured a visitor to his poor house ; and he led the conversation to district politics, anything rather than his own ailment. Thereupon the Englishman, to whom he was well known, humouring him, chatted easily on familiar subjects. When he confirmed the diagnosis of his subordinate and remarked that under the treatment adopted a speedy recovery might be expected, Premnáth replied that it would be lack of courtesy to a friend so honoured, were he now to depart to the rest for which his soul longed. Then the Englishman answered cheerfully, " And consider, too, the loss to me and my able assistant. Nay, Bábu Sáhib, our future repute, his and mine, hangs upon our success in doctoring the renowned banker of Ronáhi. For our sake then, you really must consent to be healed. And when you do resolve finally to depart in peace, call in your old family Speedwell to prepare you for the journey."

When the excitement from the visit of the genial surgeon had subsided, Premnáth relapsed into indifference as to the issue. He submitted passively to the prescribed treatment,

pleased only that the strict prohibition against the admission of visitors protected him from the circle of lugubrious faces wont to gather round a sick-bed.

After the departure of the doctor, he lay quite still for a long time, while quiet images floated through his brain like movements reflected in still waters.

"Are you there, little daughter?" he asked at length, and Har Sundari, sitting at the head of his bed, answered softly.

"Come in front, where I can see you," he said. She changed her position, and he looked on her face in silence, while she sate before him with downcast eyes. When at last he spoke she looked up, and he noted her luminous eyes under sharp brows.

"Little daughter, a cloud has lifted from your countenance since I looked upon it last at dawn."

"Perhaps it was the reflection of your distress," she replied. "But now your features fall into cheerful lines. You revived under the doctor's influence and the rays of hope passed on to me."

"Then, little daughter, you are cheerful again, thinking I shall be restored to health."

"Why not?"

"You would imply that I should desire to live."

"It is fit you should live and rule this house."

"But you think me unwilling?"

"I know these things well."

"Nay, my daughter, I leave the issue placidly in the hands of those who rule life and death. But, if I judged rightly, in the days of your bereavement, you accepted not your lot with humility?"

After a short pause, she answered: "I confess, dear father, I hated the cruel force which put out the light of my life, even the God. Aye, and now, after long, long years, the angry passion arises at times. In my heart I curst in silence and wept over my impotence. And then a great fear came upon me, lest Síva, the destroyer of my beloved, should turn in anger and snatch away my son, my little Bál gobind. I smothered my curses deep in my heart, lest the Awful One

should perceive the angry glimmer ;—and I fell prostrate, praying that He would spare my son ;—Him I would adore, to Him only would I offer sacrifice. And as I wept and prayed, my heart was eased ; my prayer was accepted, my boy was saved.

“ Then I prayed for life for myself, that I might lavish a mother’s fostering care on my son, and rear him to manhood, the image of my beloved. I clung with all my strength to life, to guide him through the perils of youth, and lead his destined wife in the righteous way.

“ Thus, my revered father, I lived on and found rest : my self absorbed in another, I dared to live—and weep no more. Ah, father, the Great One, even Síva, answered my prayer ; and, surely, He chose not to see the flame of curses which I smothered even as they leapt forth.”

She ceased speaking, and clasping the hand he held out bowed over it.

“ Little comforter,” he said softly. “ Brave heart ! Thy words are seeds of thought implanted in my brooding soul.”

After a prolonged silence, he continued : “ Thy saintly spirit is aware of things remote, even as the senses of the peafowl of the rain-cloud beyond our ken. Tell me, then ; the dear one we have lost, what would she have counselled ? ”

“ Ah, that great heart I knew so well, through joy and sorrow, from childhood unto age !—Listen ! Her thought was of her son, of my brother, Dwárkánáth, and of the household he was to guide and rule. May I speak, father, and without transgressing ? His reverence for his mother was unspeakable ; to forfeit her esteem, a penalty beyond measure. If his father too depart, who remains to check his wayward impulse ere it grow in strength and drive to wayward acts—— ? ”

She broke off suddenly, and he mused placidly, for no emotion stirred in his weary heart. At length he asked : “ Tell me, little daughter, how shall a man will to live, in whose heart all desire has sunk to rest ? ”

She answered at once : “ One desire burnt, an inextinguishable fire, in the heart of that holy one we have lost—that the

house and home she loved should endure and prosper. Those who loved and revered her, shall seek the fulfilment of this her supreme desire. They will gather fresh fuel for waning life from fixed meditation on that fervid heart—even as the anchorite draws strength from inward vision directed to his God. Thus shall live again on the earth the departed spirit. He who cherishes not the supreme will of the Beloved is a traitor to his love. Thus by love is life linked to life, and death conquered."

He lay silent again before he spoke. "Oh, thou little mother of my son's son, of Bál Gobinda—he the first of our stock to tread the New Path : may he be preserved among all its perils, and fulfil his mother's hopes !

"But for thy words : seeds lie dormant long in the parched earth ; but when the rain falls, they send forth stem and leaves and flowers and fruit."

He closed his eyes, and seemed to sink in sleep.

CHAPTER XXX

CONSOLATIONS OF FAITH

IT was when the disease left him and his strength slowly returned, that Premnáth became acutely conscious of his misery in the vacant house. The presence that had filled it; the influence which had permeated every nook and cranny; the warm love that had wrapped him round in a spiritual garment; the dear voice fraught with sympathy, speaking words of comfort and good counsel, of kindly jesting broken with mellow laughter, of petulance and mocking which stung and healed in love;—all had vanished, and left the house an empty shell devoid of life, the dry socket wherein had sparkled the eye of love. The galling inmate of his heart was a longing never to be appeased. “Nevermore!” he groaned in secret; “and doomed to life. Would I had never awoke from that trance of peace, to this sorrow of a parted life!”

But no word he spake of his desolation, not even to the saintly widow, who, nevertheless, read his heart as an open book.

He sought, in prolonged ritual and prayer, in the sacred routine and the mechanical observances of his ancient cult, in an unbroken course of discipline, to close down the springs of thought and stifle all desire. And he gained a measure of the calm to consider his future.

A return to the traffic of the market and the trumpery public business of the town and bench of justices was now so distasteful that he shrank from it with a spiritual nausea as from something unclean.

He recurred to the project whence had originated the fatal pilgrimage—his proposal to devote his remaining years to

study and meditation. During his travels he had gathered new ideas from intercourse with professors of many sects, especially from his discussions with the Dásnámi monk, and he now needed undisturbed leisure to meditate on these, and haply reach some definite principles of Knowing and Being.

He recalled the protests of his wife, first urged so warmly on that morning which now seemed so long past ; she had pressed him to defer his retirement until the fitness of their son had been tested, and his own purpose proved to be ripe fruit of his heart. But as to his son, he was already invested with full authority, and had not failed. And as to his own purpose, this was now mature and constant ; and what other object of graver import was left him in life ?

He desired above all to pass the remainder of his days within the four walls made holy by Her indwelling and their common life : as Brindaban and Dwárka to the worshippers of the divine Krishna, the land where He had played and toiled and suffered, so to him this ancient house. Here a recluse, devoted to spiritual things, he could live under the strict rule which binds the wayward spirit in the narrow path of concentrated religious thought. Absorbed in meditation, striving patiently but strenuously to solve the Problems of Being, which arise ever again in new shapes after every solution offered by the sages, he might escape from the world of sense present and past, and from the insatiable longing which racked his heart ; he might perhaps become as completely oblivious of the years of manhood as of the first years of infancy—years filled with varied life of sense, non-existent in the memory, yet haply active below the shallow surface of consciousness.

Thus did Premnáth justify his choice, to dwell in his house as a recluse withdrawn from care for worldly things. And after many days the aching of his heart was stilled. The past became transformed into a memory of a happy existence in another sphere, and his present life a state to be accepted placidly until its natural close. His peace of mind seemed to be the result of a benign influence from the holy spirit once linked with his.

He passed many hours of each day in the performance of ritual and purification, and recitation of prayers, fixing his thoughts on each term, motion and posture so intensely that he became unconscious of his surroundings as one in a trance. Every syllable of the Gayatri began to affect him as a direct revelation of the Divinity to his soul, unfolding meanings inexpressible in words :—

“ *Om ! Earth, Sky, Heaven !
Om ! That perfect giver of life !
That Light divine,
That Light which alone bringeth understanding !* ”

When in the morning twilight he stood on the river-bank motionless, reciting these words without pause until the first ray of the sun shone upon his face, it seemed that the God had arisen in answer to his prayer to illumine through his eyes the deepest recesses of his spirit where lie the hidden truths, and for a moment he lost sense of individuality in communion with the Divine Spirit. Through countless generations his forefathers had stood on this riverside murmuring this most ancient and holy of prayers ;—only through the illusions of time and space were they separate and distinct from him ; in Real Being they merged in him and he in them, all alike manifestations of the Timeless One. Thus in the ecstasy of prayer he lost all sense of an empty world, and was joined in fleeting union with the Divine Love, wherein only is lasting comfort for the craving heart.

When these mystical transports were passed, he turned to the lesser light of reason, conscious that they had left behind no clear thoughts, and were indeed devoid of definite intellectual basis. Then, after prolonged meditation, when his soul was numbed as a fixed limb under pressure, his intellectual faculties would awake to active and acute criticism. For there were two sides of Premn  th’s soul, each in turn dominant : the emotional found satisfaction in the ecstasies of prayer ; but the intellectual moved spontaneously in the sphere of critical reason, tested every thought and emotion with a corrosive scepticism and demanded clear perceptions, definite thoughts and logical deductions.

If reason were the Lesser Light to display the secrets of Being, still it showed its objects in cool white light. The scope of speculative thought might be limited, yet it dealt with distinct ideas ; and its range might perhaps expand through constant and vigorous exercise ; it might even gather from the religious emotions some elements transformable into material for rational treatment.

At his invitation, the doctors of divinity of the many and opposed Schools of World-Wisdom came and expounded and debated ; of the world as Unreal and Illusion ; of the world as Matter ; of the world as Atoms ;—even of the new doctrines of Siva in his aspect of the God of Love ; of spiritual and ideal love, of faith that renounces reason, and ecstasy as intercourse with the Divinity.

He heard them all, questioned and received explanations with outward humility, and sent them on their way bearing liberal donations. But his critical mind found satisfaction in none. Each learned pedant cited triumphantly the Holy text as interpreted by the master of his school, and refuted the doctrines of his adversaries with subtlety ; each was eager to show his skill in dialectic fencing, and if one was more nimble in wit, more copious in language, richer in quotations than another, this was merely the relative positions of the controversialists of the moment, and brought about no final settlement of the question at issue.

“ There are many dialectic solutions of the riddle, but no means of verifying which is correct. And of the Scriptures of Ancient Days, by what test amenable in the Court of Reason shall we accept the dogma of the inspiration of the Saints through whom they were revealed ? What grounds have we to believe that the Sages of a remote past were better able than their successors of to-day, to distinguish between realities and hallucinations ? And how numberless, both now and in the past, have been the deluded seers of visions !

“ For the calm reason there is no way to pass out of that sphere of actual experience, where dialectic results are verified by contact with reality and error brings sure ruin in its train.”—

He grew weary of the doctors of divinity and their fine-drawn dialectics : they brought no conviction to the sceptical mind and no comfort.

Not the less, in prayer and ritual he continued to enjoy a spiritual comfort such as warms the heart when the Beloved is present : such as soothes and calms and strengthens the child in the refuge of his mother's lap ; his restless intellect was stilled, and he ceased to feel alone in a desolate world. Here at least was a great actuality, whatever its explanation. It seemed an ultimate fact of consciousness, even as the consciousness of one's own existence and that of being other than self.

—"What is the world apart from the percipient self ? No answer can be given : indeed, the question involves an absurdity.

—"What is the influence which fills the soul with comfort in prayer ? The answer can be mere conjecture, beyond possible verification. Yet the fact is as real as the visible and tangible world.

—"And so of doctrine : if it comfort thy mind, guide thy ways, bring harmony into thy life—accept it as a boon, though no discourse of reason can establish it on a firm foundation. If it lead thee to that which thy heart acknowledges as the higher and nobler for thy nature, then for thee it is Divine. But if it repel thee as degrading that which thou hast esteemed as most noble, then it is false, for between thee and the Being whence thou hast sprung there shall be harmony : of that Being art thou : it is of thee.

—"But of the truth or falsehood of spiritual doctrine, as we judge of truth and falsehood in the sensible world, there is no test whatever. The criterion of spiritual doctrine lies in the heart itself, not in the dialectic brain.

—"The ecstasy in prayer is no less real than the world as perceived, and to attribute it to a Divine Influence, no more irrational than to attribute the world as perceived to a self-existing reality independent of the percipient mind."

Premnáth withdrew from debate with the doctors of divinity to his thoughts and their expression in words for his

own edification. From one book only he derived consolation, the Bhagavad Gita, The Psalm of the Blessed One. He endeavoured to read with humility ; if the doctrine seemed irrational, this might be due to his defective comprehension ; assumptions might be intuitions of truth by one whose mental range transcended his own, as that of a wise and experienced financier transcends that of his simple client.

—“ Let each thought of the Master sink into thy heart, and rest there as a seed, until it spring up clothed in a garment of words fitted by thyself, the disciple. Thus only shall the thoughts of the Master become thine own, the flowering of thine own meditation.”

Under the strong spell of the Psalm of the Blessed One, he drew up the Compendium of Devotion, “ The Hymn of Brahman,” and each clause became the subject of his meditation. Thus he subdued for a while the critical intellect which corrodes faith, and yet maintained the activity of thought without which the mind sinks into deadly apathy.

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HYMN OF BRAHMAN

THE UNPERCEIVED, THE UNKNOWABLE

I make all things ; and I unmake them ;
On me as a cord are strung the Pearls of Being.
I am the taste in water,
And the light of the sun,
And the sounds in the air,
And the strength and beauty of man
In body and soul ;
And the sweet scent of the earth,
And the glow of the fire—
I, the eternal seed of the All.

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Know that the worlds and all that they hold, move in an endless circle of being ;

But for him who enters into me, Brahman, the Supreme Goal, there is no re-birth.

Of a myriad ages is a Day of Brahman ; of a myriad ages his Night.
At the Dawn all things come forth from Brahman, the Unknowable ;

they dissolve at the Fall of Night ; and again and again come forth, ever the same and dissolve.

But I, the Unknowable, Brahman, am not of these, I, uncreated, undissolved.

I am the supreme abode : who entereth into me returneth not.

.

The Path that leadeth to the Supreme Goal is the Path of Emancipation. He who seeketh it, shall obey these my commandments :— there is no other way :—

Thou shalt not seek the fruits of thy actions ; nor to be happy, nor free from pain ; nor to be delivered from life to escape evil ; but thou shalt seek Holiness, and nothing else whatsoever.

Thy penance and sacrifice shall be for Holiness' sake. All thy soul shall be devoted to Holiness. Thus shall thy acts to sustain life be pure.

Hate not, love not, grieve not, wish not ; be alike to all beings ; thus shall thy heart be still, and thy soul undisturbed to follow the path to the Supreme Goal.

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Know that the Soul is purified through Discipline and Self-Control :—

Take the food needed for life and no more ;

Dwell apart ;

Control thy speech and all thy movements ;

Take thy seat in a clean place, on a deerskin and holy kúsa grass, and with thy body, head and neck even and unmoved, fix thy eyes on one point ;—then, in peace of heart abstracted from all things of sense, meditate on the Supreme Being.

These are the rules of discipline for him who seeketh purity of Soul.

The Controlled Self is a friend : Self Uncontrolled is a foe.

The Controlled Self is self-centred, tranquil amid heat or cold, pleasure or pain, honour or dishonour ; neither attracted nor repelled by things of sense.

But thoughts uncontrolled stray to dwell on things of sense, whereby Desire is kindled, which is insatiable.

But when the mind is withdrawn from things of sense and steadfast to subdue Desire, it becomes free for that meditation on the Supreme Being which leads to Devotion ;

And Perfect Devotion dissolves the chain of births and deaths and the Soul passes into Eternal Peace.

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Know that although thou abstain from action, yet shall thy Soul not be delivered from the thralldom of action : in inaction alone there is no holiness ; and verily in every moment of life is action.

Through acts done in Devotion is emancipation, not otherwise.

Therefore uproot from thy heart all affection, and engage in battle without Desire. Then shall thy every act be Devotion, and in the end

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shall thy Soul be delivered from the thraldom of action, and be united with Brahman, the Supreme, the Unknowable.

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Verily I will cast off the bondage of the flesh, neither will I rejoice in pleasure nor grieve in pain ;

I will desire nothing, fear nothing, be wroth at nothing ;

All I do shall be done in Devotion ;

Thus shall my Soul become free of sin, and enter into eternal bliss.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RATIONALIST

A NEW element was introduced into Premnâth's meditative life when his grandson Bâlgobind returned home after his examination for the degree of Bachelor of Arts of the Calcutta University.

The young man was the first of his kin to exchange the course of instruction under hereditary pandits for that of an English College. Both his mother and Premnâth had regarded the innovation with grave anxiety, but the boy's wish to study English and prepare for Government service had been strongly supported by his grandmother, and they had yielded a reluctant consent. Premnâth had merely insisted that the college to be attended by the young student should be that at Benâres, and Sanskrit included in his degree examination ; the influence of the venerable surroundings would, he hoped, check any tendency to stray from the pious ways of his own people, and the necessity of mastering the sacred language maintain unbroken the links with the ancient learning.

On the return of the young man after the completion of his university course, Premnâth recalled the discussions and anticipations which four years before had preceded his departure. In intervals, when neither prayer nor ritual, study nor meditation occupied him, his thoughts began to dwell with increasing insistence upon the young man. He became eager to probe the student's mind to ascertain his attitude to those metaphysical and ethical questions with which he had been himself so long occupied.

This lad, he mused, has surely traversed spheres of thought into which none of our kin has ventured before ; spheres

perhaps as foreign to ours as the habits and garb of our Western rulers. What has he gathered ; what, if anything, has he assimilated ? How far has this new learning modified or displaced the old ? Or has it perchance been so completely alien as to leave him fundamentally unaffected, as the hard rock overrun by a stream, or at best, as the stars obscured by the passing clouds. Not the matter of his study is important, but its influence on his mental attitude to the world material and spiritual.

Influenced by these reflections the recluse found a new object of interest, which, under the semblance of an extension of his own range of knowledge, drew him insensibly into a world of realities.

The young man, by nature reserved, was disinclined to speak of his own feelings and opinions except to a few intimates of his own age. In the presence of his grandfather he was shy ; and the old man, on his side, was not at his ease with this reserved student, whose respectful demeanour seemed to cover an alert and independent mind, criticising his elders with cool discernment of their strength and weakness.

Sometimes the sound of the young man's voice reached Premnáth, speaking, it seemed, to his mother from a full heart in unrestrained confidence ; and beside them sate his wife, Indráin, playing with her babe, but listening to his voice and watching his face in quiet delight. Then a shadow of loneliness passed over the old man, and he murmured involuntarily, " who retires to solitude is soon alone."

He thought : If my Beloved had been here, to her this youth would have unlocked his heart ; assured of sympathy, and the patient hearing needed for complete understanding, and in the end he would have listened to wise and gently spoken counsel. But the old are apt to regard the new thoughts and new ways of youth as the natural follies of exuberant life, to be shed in due course when the down on the cheek is displaced by the crisp beard of manhood. What wonder then that their expansion of heart is checked ! There can be no unreserved converse between youth and age unless

this attitude of complacent patronage is banished, and the fresh-blooming thoughts of a youth are treated with sympathetic consideration as a genuine outcome of his nature and experience.

As he meditated thus, his austerity dissolved ; the spirit of his lost wife entered into him, endowing him with some of her gentleness and insight into the hearts of those she loved. On the opposite arcade he could see Bál gobind reading, apparently quite absorbed in his book. Then, upon the impulse of the moment, he walked slowly round the arcade to the young man, who remained unaware of his approach until he stood beside him.

" May I be pardoned," exclaimed Bál gobind, rising hastily ; " but I did not know you were standing by me."

The old man smiled gently, laying his hand on his grandson's shoulder : " Nay, no apology is needed. You were lost in your reading, like one in a trance. I but wandered round, and now idly interrupt your studies."

" Oh, I have read enough," replied the young man. " Will you not sit down, sir ? "

Premnáth at once took the proffered stool, and the young man stood beside him against the pillar, holding the book with his finger inserted between the pages.

" As I looked across at you seated reading," said Premnáth, " I was struck more than ever by your likeness to your grandmother, and now, my son, as you look down on me, I seem to see again her eyes."

The young man was about to reply with one of the conventional phrases which well-bred youths are wont to use when complimented by a senior on their resemblance to an honoured ancestor, but he was checked by observing the old man's trembling lips, and, responding to the emotion, he answered :

" I honoured and loved her most, and my loss too is very great."

The old man remained silent, with bowed head, until he had recovered his calmness.

"It was she, our lost one, who sent you on a new way to gather strange fruit and flowers."

Bálgobind replied with a faint smile: "When I first left for college, grandmother said: 'Like the heifer first loosed to graze the forest pasture, thy nature will shun the poisonous herbage.'"

"And what did you answer?"

"I asked, but how if I gather as flowers of truth what you deem flowers of evil? But grandmother replied at once: 'If indeed they be flowers of evil, then forthwith they will wither in thy hand.' Her trust in me was unreserved, the fruit, I think, of her great love. And so I spoke."

"The love indeed was great," replied Premnáth, "but her insight was not thereby obscured. And as to the flowers of knowledge gathered, she held that their fruit was conduct; and though knowledge be holy, yet is it barren, as a virgin dedicated to God, if it be not the source of conduct."

"Her words to me when I left were: 'Act as thy conscience bids thee, and thou wilt not be wrong before God.'"

"She spoke again from her trust in the rectitude of your heart," replied Premnáth.

"I think, sir," returned the young man, "my grandmother's meaning extended further. But her wisdom was intuitive, I may say instinctive, and she never expanded it to general doctrine. But if I may be permitted to do so, I would express her full meaning: The principles of speculative and religious thought are many and antagonistic, but they may be tested by their practical result: if they lead to right action, they are not false; if they lead to evil, they are not true. Between conduct as right and wrong conscience is the arbiter; and thus the final decision regarding speculative truth and error lies with the court of conscience."

"Surely, surely," said Premnáth, "some such doctrine as this lay at the back of your grandmother's mind, ever practical. If a man fulfilled righteously the duties of life, then it mattered little what creed he professed. If his creed led him to neglect these duties, then it was poisonous. But you were going to add something further, when I interrupted you?"

"I was merely about to add as a comment or gloss of my own, that in the case of prayer and ritual apart from its effect on conduct, the value consists in spiritual comfort it brings to the worshipper."

"You mean, that whatever form of worship brings spiritual comfort to each, that for him is true?"

"Yes, except that I should prefer to substitute the word 'real' for 'true,'" replied Bál gobind. "The emotion is a certain fact of consciousness; whether or not it can be truly ascribed to the influence of a Divinity is quite another matter. It may be beneficent, although the explanation of its source is quite irrational."

"You would say then that the religious emotion springs from the belief of the worshipper, whether that be true or false?"

"Yes," replied Bál gobind. "The belief must of course be a firm conviction."

"In other words then, you would maintain that the spiritual elevation is adequately explained by the emotions excited by the belief, and no external divine energy need be assumed to explain it."

"Yes," assented Bál gobind. "The belief being present, the emotions result."

"But there arises this difficulty," continued Premnáth. "Are we justified in assuming that the same result would follow if the belief were utterly false: that no actual spiritual communion with divine essences is necessary to the completion of the state in question? Faith must of course be firmly rooted in the heart, nevertheless the co-operation of a Divine Energy may be indispensable to produce the spiritual consolation of worship. Faith thus regarded, becomes the mental condition for the communication of the soul with the Divinity."

"And with regard to the variety and apparent antagonism of creeds, from all of which similar beneficial emotional results ensue, I would urge, that as among different races the same thought is clothed in different words and symbols, so the Divine Being manifests himself in different ways: under all the diversity of creeds is the one Divine Essence: under

the myriad forms of worship the one Divine Power is addressed."

"Here indeed, sir," replied the young man after a pause, "you reduce the inquiry to the real issue. If you permit, I would state it thus : The essential point at issue is the affirmation or negation of the Divine Influence addressed in prayer : the varied and even antagonistic attributes in the popular creeds may be ignored as merely subordinate matters. If such a Divine Power really exists, we may rationally ascribe to this power the spiritual comfort derived from prayer. In the briefest terms : if such a power existed it would naturally explain the effect. Thus the question really is as to the existence of this cause.

"Now as to this, I would urge first, that the actual spiritual experience in prayer may be adequately explained by mental science : our mental and moral faculties when carefully analysed are in themselves sufficient to account for the peculiar emotions arising in worship.

"Secondly, I would plead, that when our experience of nature and our own minds is properly sifted, it affords no sufficient warrant for affirming the existence of such a Divine Influence : it is a mere hypothesis impossible to verify, and therefore scientifically illegitimate. It is at best a sublime fancy, sanctioned indeed by the sages and poets of ancient days and supported by pious men passionately, and soberly by those who regard the belief as a useful fiction indispensable to moral order ; and not least vehemently by all priests throughout the world whose offices depend upon its acceptance. Nevertheless, when tested at last by the light of scientific reason, it is revealed as destitute of real evidence.

"The one fact of experience which most strongly suggests this Divine Influence is this very consciousness of spiritual comfort and elevation of mind which is felt by the faithful in worship, this consciousness of communion with God as it is termed. But, as I said, a scientific analysis of the intellect and emotions explains this emotion adequately, and therefore no explanation outside the range of experience is needed. And even were these emotions inexplicable in the present state of

our knowledge, it would be irrational to ascribe them to the agency of a cause for whose existence we have no evidence."

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Premnáth listened to his grandson with astonishment, verging on dismay, though not unmixed with admiration of his easy phrases and lucid summary. A mere youth of three-and-twenty, he criticised the most solemn doctrines with cool confidence, and with the same aloofness as he might have debated a question of the origin of the ruined buildings in the forest—of the identity of a writer of an anonymous letter, or the interpretation of a text in Pálini's grammar. He complacently assumed a critical superiority, demanded fair credentials for sublime revelations, and rejected them as mere fancies devoid of rational basis. His so-called scientific method ran riot through the most holy beliefs.

But in his demeanour Premnáth revealed nothing of these thoughts: he was bent on understanding the young man. After a pause, therefore, he said quietly:

"I think I understand your position, and your exposition interests me greatly. But tell me now, do they teach this negation of Spiritual and Divine Influences as part of your university course?"

The young man smiled: "Of our course of study for the degree? Oh, not at all. Our textbooks and lectures indeed give us instruction as to the grounds on which these sublime beliefs are supported. Our professors say in substance: Such are the teachings of the sages who have devoted themselves to these inquiries, and every student must be acquainted with them. But they teach us also that an earnest inquirer will accept nothing on mere authority: he will exercise his own intelligence to test and judge for himself."

"Then the attitude recommended is rather a reserved scepticism than reverence for authority?"

"Well, yes. Not for the ordinary mortal, of course, who is sufficiently occupied with his daily necessary affairs; but for the student of world-wisdom. Laymen must of course accept on authority what their teachers deliver. But the seeker for

wisdom must doubt everything, accept nothing on mere authority, and vigilantly check the emotional influence of his early training—a most difficult task. This is the condition of the progress of knowledge: without it we must rest in a stagnant past.”

“Such inquiries entice to a path bestrewn with perilous errors.”

“No doubt,” replied Bál gobind quickly. “But adventurers must incur risks for the progress of Knowledge.”

“Well, well,” said Premnáth, “youth is prone to rashness—and perhaps it is well. But you speak again of Progress. Do you mean by that, movement away from the creed of our fathers; their ways and thoughts being treated as suggestions to be rigorously tested, amended, and it may be utterly rejected?”

“Ah, there you touch on one of the fundamental points,” replied Bál gobind. “Since the revelations of the saints and the teaching of the sages of the past, cannot be accepted on authority, it is implied that they must be grounded on evidence to be tested by our present knowledge, and judged from the standpoint we have now attained. If the evidence collapses under this scrutiny, then the doctrines and revelations cannot be accepted.

“For we maintain that knowledge has advanced: it has become science, strict in method and exact in matter. The correspondence between our thoughts and things has become more accurate and more extensive, and, as a consequence, the adjustment between our conduct and the conditions of life has become more harmonious and wider in range. Now this is what I mean by the progress of knowledge.

“And the practical object of this advancement: it is to improve the conditions of our life here in this world; that each succeeding generation may exercise over self and nature a control more complete than its predecessor.”

“You hurry on to new regions of thought,” said Premnáth, smiling gently. “And I follow you, breathless. But this much I understand, that you are advancing far into a new and alien region of speculation. The progress with which our ancestral teachers were interested was that of the individual soul in the several stages of its existence; but the progress

which you deem fundamental is the material advancement of each generation in this temporal world, and the individual soul with its progressive purification and exaltation vanishes completely from your view. Am I not right in this inference?"

"Quite right, sir," replied Bálgebínd. "The only advancement with which our science is concerned is that in life here in this world. Regarding the pre-existence of the soul and its individual existence apart from the body, science can find no adequate evidence. It regards the very idea of a disembodied spirit as a venerable fancy, like the idea of disembodied light and heat, or the phantoms of the sun and the moon and the stars and the storm and the clouds—all sprung from the facile imaginations of our forefathers, which they consecrated in their wonderful hymns, which even now as poetry move us to unstinted admiration.

"The mind of man, his keen senses, his intellect, his conscience, all the emotions of his heart—all that make the idea of the soul—these are the very flower of life, the supreme achievement of nature through the living organism. The individual mind may perish with the individual body; but instinct, thought and word, live through each generation, passed from one to another in tradition and record; but above all, embodied in the organism ready to unfold as flowers from seeds and buds each in due season of unfolding. Such is the creed of science."

The calm but earnest tone of exposition in which the young man had begun his reply, grew warm with feeling towards the close, and in his voice there became audible the first ring of enthusiasm. His grandsire noted the change, and in spite of the heresies expressed was drawn closer to him. After a meditative pause, he said:

"Thus then, my son, as I understand this doctrine, all endeavour not directed to the maintenance of this transient self is directed to the fleeting generations that follow; the eternal world of spirit is to be abandoned for this illusory world of sense; essential being, for an illusion. You would transform the world constructed by the senses into Being itself: illusion—Maya—into reality."

“Not exactly as you put it, sir,” replied the student. “As to Being in itself, this is not a material of Knowledge at all. It is a self-contradiction to speak of reasoning about something existing in itself: nothing can be reasoned about or conceived at all except as Knowledge. We can contrast a mental illusion with reality; but we cannot compare an illusion with something existing in itself—for us a *non-ens*.”

“As to the doctrine of Maya, or World Illusion, that the world of sense, which we call the real world, is a mere phantom danced by a Divine Power before the knowing mind—this is nothing but a freak of the perverse imagination. We know of no Divine Magician, and have no ground for accepting as unerring insight the fancies of ancient philosophers, Sankara or other, whence he sprung into being.

“This celebrated distinction between the world of sense as illusory, and an assumed world of reality, is a mere confusion with the genuine distinction we all make between mental illusions and realities; and no sane man commits any mistake between the two; between the illusions of the drunkard, the lunatic, the fevered brain of sickness, the dream world of sleep—on the one side; and on the other, the realities of the ordered world of experience—which is an ultimate fact of consciousness even with those who stigmatise it as an illusion of sense. The Me and Not-Me, fundamental facts of consciousness, can by no cunning sophistry be actually confounded into one.

“And as to this perverse transformation of real experience into illusions of the sense, its origin is not far to seek. I think it must have happened to every thoughtful lad to sit still with closed eyes and imagine all the world he knows and all the people therein to be mere creations of his fancy, and that he and his thoughts are the sole existing things;—but no sane lad ever treated this as more than a pleasant game of make-believe; this was left to our professional dreamers of possibilities beyond possible experience; and it has been left to them to tender their fancy as a sacred mystery intelligible only to the few initiated.

“And for this phantasm of their crazy speculations these

wise men ask us to exchange the reality of the historic past, with all its sublime struggles, great deeds and noble lives, and the warm reality of the world filled with a potential future of higher and higher life. All this they ask us to regard as shadows projected into the mind by a tricky god for a pastime ;—and he sits laughing roguishly at the simplicity of poor humanity which treats his shadows as stern realities ! ”

Premnáth meditatively, after a long pause, replied : “ Thus it seems, my son, that according to your new world-wisdom our saints and poets, whom we regard as inspired mediums, and the sages their interpreters, mistook the fabric of their own Imagination for Divine Revelation ; they have assumed the existence and influence of spiritual beings without warrant ; at best their assumptions are mere guesses, quite beyond the range of possible verification. This world of sense and the knowing mind are the only realities ; and the mind itself is a mere outgrowth of organised atoms, which ceases to exist when they are scattered. Your science leaves us lonely in world of matter, with nothing more holy than this gross matter and the consciousness which twinkles for a few years and is then extinguished—a futile production of a futile world.”

“ Nay, sir,” exclaimed Bál gobind, “ that is hardly a fair summary. For one thing, you entirely overlook the permanence of life from generation to generation, and its progressive character——”

“ What then remains holy, to be the foundation of piety ? ” interrupted Premnáth.

“ All that was holy in the past—nay, more,” replied the young man with a flash of enthusiasm. “ The beauty, sublimity and nobleness spread through the world remain ;—the beauty of the flower and the leaf ; of flowing water and sailing cloud ; of the calm sky and the rush of the storm ; of the starry spaces ; of the majesty of the sun and the gentle moon ;—beautiful and sublime as existing in themselves no less than as creations of a transcendent cause. And in the heart of man shall dwell no less, justice and righteousness, and pity and love ; and most holy of all, man’s ceaseless endeavour that

these shall prevail in the world ; that every man shall enjoy full liberty of self-expansion, unhindered by disease, oppression and avoidable ignorance. These are holy, and this aspiration most holy ;—and of the ancient creeds, the measure of their holiness is the potency of their influence over the heart of man to pursue these holy things."

The old man was again moved to sympathy by the ardent tones of his grandson's voice and his manifest sincerity. But he answered once more, in the quiet voice of an impartial critic :

" You set forth your case forcibly, my son. But you have not dealt with what seems to me the practical difficulty. These sublime and noble sentiments have hitherto been associated with a spiritual conception of life, and regarded as inspirations from a higher sphere of existence and supported by Divine Sanction. You have severed them from the roots whence we believe them to have sprung, and I fear that sooner or later they must wither away, lacking their spiritual nourishment—even as the lotus flower cut from its root.

" But on these and many other points you have raised, I would meditate in quiet : my brain works but slowly on new ideas. I hope we may go over these things in many and prolonged discussions. I too am a student still, and would understand the new revelation which has attracted your fresh and eager mind, no less than I have sought to grasp the teachings of our venerable past."

" Ah, sir," exclaimed the young man, " need I say what a privilege I esteem it to be permitted to speak openly and frankly before you what I have learnt and thought of these great subjects."

" My son," said his grandsire, " there is no comfort equal to that of the close and sympathetic communion of mind with mind."

He grasped the young man's hand and remained silent a few moments.

" But tell me," he then asked in a cheerful tone, " what is the English book you were studying so intently ? "

" A work that has fascinated me and a few of my fellow-

students. It deals with the First Principles of Philosophy and Science, and seeks to demonstrate that the world we know, material and moral, has gradually developed by natural causes, rising out of the simple elements we discern in experience to the most complex manifestations of physical and mental life."

"What, a new prophet?"

"Nay, no prophet: one who addresses evidence to reason only."

"So. Perhaps some day you will explain to me what this light from the west has new for our ancient wisdom."

Then Premnáth withdrew to his chamber of meditation.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MYSTIC

REFLECTION on the young man's confession of faith increased Premnâth's sympathy. It seemed that the student's criticisms were nowise moved by contumacious rebellion against the discipline of a venerable past, but the offspring of a resolute and independent spirit, earnestly and not without reverence, seeking to find among many contending doctrines a guide to his conduct through life. Had he not himself, distressed by the insufficiency of the old doctrines to satisfy his reason, abandoned the perplexities of speculation, and sought refuge in the ecstasy of prayer and the mystical teaching of the Bhagavad Gita? Why should not this eager youth, equally dissatisfied by the old religious and metaphysical doctrines, endeavour, in the full energy of his intellect, to reach a purely scientific explanation of man's place in the universe, cleared of the crude spiritual conceptions with which the Old Path bristled? If he failed to reach any satisfactory result, he too would in the end find a refuge in those spiritual mysteries beyond the range of rational thought.

Was it not natural for the youth to surmise that the difficulty of reconciling the facts of life with accepted religious doctrines arises from the initial error in these, and not from the incapacity of the mind to find an "intelligible" solution of a "mystery"? So long as the earth was posited as the centre of revolution, the observed motions of the heavenly bodies presented to the inquirer innumerable difficulties which a maze of cunning hypotheses sufficed not to explain. But when the sun was assumed to be the centre of the system, and the earth merely one of many revolving planets, then the

difficulties vanished, and complete order was apparent. Might not a similar result be attained if man and mind ceased to be regarded as the centre of being, and were considered merely as phases in the development of natural forces precisely as all other things in the world of experience?—At least, the attempt was worth making.

Thus was heterodoxy excused. The old man's prime desire was not to criticise, still less to attempt to refute his grandson's speculations, but to understand his mind. Understanding brought sympathy as its follower, and Premnáth recalled the widow's firm faith that whithersoever the new path might lead her son, it would never lead him away from righteousness ;—and he was now well disposed to share her confidence.

He felt desirous of conversing with her, but he remembered that it was the day of her fast, when she sate much retired in her chamber, and he was loath to intrude. He went up to the roof seeking a change and the fresher air.

The sun had set, the hot wind dropped, and the leaves rustled gently above the parapet which they had sheltered during the afternoon. The birds, returned to their roosting-places among the boughs, were chattering and hopping to and fro before they settled down for the night, and the bats flitted past on their noiseless wings.

His mind was weary after the long strain of attention and thought, and as he leant on the parapet and looked through the foliage at the fading light, a cloud of depression settled on him. Unconsciously he groaned as one in pain, and murmured, "Never more, and lost surely through my own wilfulness."

Then a soft voice behind him exclaimed : "Ah, sir, I knew not you were here," and turning round he saw the widow. "Pardon me, I saw no one in the dusk."

"No intrusion, little daughter," he said. "I stood idly watching the red light dying away behind the shimmering leaves. And then a consciousness of sin shot through my heart."

"How, of sin?"

"I saw myself as self-centred, blind to all but my own purpose, and heedless of the sacrifice I demanded, I dragged

her we have lost away from this loved home. She, the treasure of life, perished through my vain pursuit of a phantasmal light ; forgetful of the true light of wisdom and love radiant from her clear spirit ! ”

“ Ah, sir, who should know better than her son’s wife and widow, how gentle and full of love was her heart, and how wise was her counsel ! ”

“ Fool, fool that I was ! ” he continued bitterly. “ You have heard, I exposed her to the storms on that long march through the wilderness down to the sea, heedless in pursuit of a mere phantom. Yes, there at holy Dwárka, I found what I deserved—emptiness : a crumbling shrine without a soul, a shell devoid of life. And by my side, ever open to me was the Holiest, the divine tenement of wisdom and love, of pity and righteousness—aye, sacred as Síta, the Beloved of Ráma.—Fool, stubborn fool ! blinded by the glamour of phantasmal things, I sought the holiest afar, when it lay even in mine own hand. Surely a mist of illusion wrapped me about, arising from my self-seeking heart, the vapour from a disordered soul. My sin, my immeasurable sin ! ”

Then the gentle widow : “ No nobler heart ever beat within a woman’s breast ; no purer rays ever shone from a woman’s brain ; never a hand more prompt to aid, nor a surer insight to guide its aid.”

“ Aye, gentle daughter ; aye, aye, how fit your words. Alas, my blindness ! My sin ! ”

“ If sin—but this I know not, and I could urge much. But, if sin, then in the unstinted acknowledgment of sin, in repentance without alloy, in patience and meekness under the penalty—in this way is there purification of the soul.”

“ Thou wouldst say, confessing thy sin, accept the penalty and murmur not.”

“ And see therein the preparation of the heart for grace.”

He shook his head mournfully and muttered, “ Grace ? ”

“ Yes, dear father,” she answered, her enthusiasm rising as she spoke. “ The way of the soul to grace. This I feel, I who have suffered no less : he who has loved and lost—only he can feel the ineffable desire for union with the Beloved, and know

that in this union is salvation. The loved being here, in this life, is the symbol of the Divine Beloved, whom we seek to clasp as the One Beloved, until our being mingles with his in bliss eternal. The longing for reunion with the Beloved we have lost, is transformed into holy desire for union with the Sublime Beloved, even Krishna-Vishnu; and then is the aching of the heart stilled by our faith that the grace of the Divine Beloved will alight upon us, and on his bosom we shall find eternal bliss."

Darkness had fallen, but the rays of the moon risen clear of the haze, fell upon the widow's face, and to Premnáth it seemed that the enraptured features shone with divine light. His rational faculties were flooded with emotions surging from the recesses of the heart, and in the flood his bitter self-reproach was swept away.

"I thank thee, little Comforter," he said in a broken voice. "Leave me awhile. I cannot speak."

"Forgive my boldness of speech, dear father," she said humbly, and bowing to his feet she glided away.

He remained leaning against the parapet with eyes fixed on the clear disc of the moon, until at length the flood of emotion subsided, and the faculty of reason recovered its control. He thought:

"Emotions are ultimate facts: these the intellect would interpret; but her instrument then is Imagination.

"Vainly elsewhere in the world of experience we seek for aught like unto Love: it stands alone, pre-eminent; a supreme end for which we sacrifice all, self and its desires; all of little worth set beside Love; its ministers profane. Those to whom Love is not revealed dwell on a lower plane. But if Love be in the heart, then is the poorest life raised above sordid surroundings—even as the stagnant pool reflecting the glory of the Sun-God.

"How shall man conceive this flower of Life, Holy Love, from an earthly root? How shall he not discern therein an exhalation from a Divine Being?

"Thus doth ardent imagination fill the blank left by know-

ledge, and create a Divine Sphere where Love, even Krishna-Vishnu, is supreme. Thence descends Ráma-Síta, the Spirit of Love in earthly shape, to comfort and fill with hope the heart of suffering man.

“And for that saintly widow, tribulations are purifying fires to fit the soul for the union with the Supreme Beloved, the final end of all desire.

“In vain will the rational mind display this faith as baseless fancy, the mere fabric of a craving heart ! In vain will reason lay bare the inextricable confusion of these assumptions ! Who shall be assured that these contradictions be not in the rational faculty of reason itself ; that the assumptions are baseless only for its limitations ; that the fervid imagination soaring upwards on the emotions of the heart is not the true interpreter, endowed with apprehension, beyond the reach of pure intellect ; that perception and thought are a broken mirror of things, but the emotions of the heart emanations from Being Itself passing directly into the conscious mind ? The consciousness of Present Divinity in worship, a direct revelation ? Perception and thought, broken light through the medium of imperfect senses and brain ?

“Are not the emotions in the pure heart of the mother a truer revelation of Being than the science of her son ? ”

Thus in prolonged brooding did the mystic within Premnáth assert his power. And he was comforted and once more calm.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CREATION AND DISSOLUTION

IN the veranda of the inner courtyard the young mother Indráin sate beside a low cot where her naked babe lay sleeping, one little hand outstretched with open palm, the other grasping an ivory figure of Krishna as the Butter Thief. She held a fan ready to whisk off flies, and, with an expression of placid happiness on her features, watched the fluttering of the delicate nostrils, the movements of the lips and the occasional twitching of the limbs. There was no movement in the house during the afternoon of oppressive heat, but, above the walls, the burning west wind blew strong, carrying past leaves and straws and dust.

Premnáth was seated near the entrance to the inner apartments musing dreamily, when the door, half opened by the draught, disclosed the little group, the mother with head and bosom bare, apparently rapt in silent adoration of her child, while she swayed the plaited fan, and on her naked arm the broad gold bracelet shone with a red gleam in the subdued light. His thoughts swiftly recurred to the days when his lost wife sate thus on the same spot with a babe, the grandfather of the child before him now. At length, after the long revolutions of the years, and the vicissitudes of growth, decay and death, the past arose to being anew, in essence the same, changed only in the transient form !

Then in a stronger gust of wind, the hinges creaked, and the mother turning anxiously to the disturbing noise, saw the old man watching her. She covered her head, smiling, and pointed to the sleeping child and the swinging door. He arose at once to close it, and receiving a smile of encouragement, he entered

noiselessly and stood at the foot of the cot. By voiceless words she begged forgiveness for remaining seated, and he, smiling acceptance of the excuse, crouched down in front of her.

"Was ever a more beautiful babe born to woman since Bál Krishna lay in his mother's lap at Gokul?" was her hushed question.

And his answer: "Surely not; nor granted to the love of a gentler mother."

"If he too prove an infant Krishna?"

"Why not? To bring everlasting glory to the house wherein he was born."

Thus they conversed in hushed voices across the sleeping infant until the strong voice of Tárá Muni, calling from within, broke the spell, and Premnáth moved softly away, closing the door of the inner court as he left.

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"The mother's adoration of the child? It is worship with constant ministration to nurse the frail beginnings of life; service in pure joy, rendered even to the exhaustion of strength, without consciousness of self-sacrifice or duty; the life-energy of the mother passes, that new life may wax and live. Her heart expands to comprehend a separate life in her own.

"Only he who loves the end as a mother loves her child can attain this complete obliteration of self.

"But again: the supreme purpose of the mother is that her child may wax strong and live: her life-energy is lavished that it may arise again, restored in fresh life. Her desire, steadfast, self-annihilating, is for the creation of another independent self. Herein there is no merging of self in another, but the transfusion of life-energy into new individual life. In the mother's love is manifest a supreme will to create, and joy in the creation.

"But a different Love fills the lonely widow's heart. Her supreme desire is for the Beloved, even Krishna-Vishnu, whom she adores, that her Self may be united with the

Divinity, conceived as the Divine Bridegroom, intermingled to vanish.

“ Thus is her Love to that of the mother as dissolution to creation, as decay to growth.

“ When the bodily strength is sapped by disease, desire wanes and flickers down as a fire lacking fuel ; then doth the exhausted spirit sink will-less to extinction. So, when from the world the Beloved hath vanished, and the bereaved Spirit is filled with vain yearning ; then the glory of life hath departed leaving the world an empty shell ;—then doth the bereaved heart seek the one thing needful to satiate its longing, union with the Beloved, imaged as the Divine Being. Faith fills the spirit with new hope, and she awaits in cheerful patience the day of union and eternal rest.

“ But, note the joy of the craftsman in his work ; of the goldsmith shaping the precious metal into forms of beauty ; of the sculptor chiselling the divine form from the stone ; even of the poor potter in his loving moulding of the earthen jar. All these rejoice in the work of their hands and brain, and expend themselves to create a new thing wherein their energy and skill are embodied. Their hearts are fixed on perfecting their work, thus creating anew. And of this joy in production and expansion of self into another individual thing—the mother’s joy in her child is the culmination.

“ In this dedication of the mother and craftsman to the creation of new forms and new lives, in this joy in shaping and making, is the rising of the sap of life to new flowers and fruit ; and the aspect thereof fills the soul with a holy joy.

“ So long as the faculties are active to work and shape and mould new thoughts and things, so long doth the heart rejoice witnessing its expansive energy ;—so long shalt thou live, and thy life be not without joy, even though thou hast suffered much.

“ Shall we not take the mother with her child as the pattern of a life : ceaseless activity under the impulse of love to accomplish the work of the day ? ”

Such were the meditations of Premnáth excited by the pure

rationalism of the student, the mysticism of the widow, and the child-worship of the mother.

One day when Premnáth came forth from prolonged meditation into the courtyard, the doorkeeper approaching, with hands palm to palm, announced that a Chaudhri Ját begged audience. And when he was admitted Premnáth recognised the younger of the two brothers whom he had admonished on the last night of his pilgrimage. After due greeting with humble obeisance, the visitor spoke :

“ My lord, when you honoured our house and bade us beware of our old ways as ways of wickedness, you commanded, when a child is born straightway send a messenger to Ronáhi, and I will come to your house and call on the holy name of Ráma that blessings may alight on the child. Behold, I am here at your bidding. My wife has been delivered—the child is a girl, and now awaits your promised blessing.”

Then Premnáth rejoiced, and answered : “ My son, my joy is very great that through me has been held sacred the life of the new-born child. Come, let us depart at once, for my heart yearns for the mother and child upon whom the blessing of the Lord Ráma shall descend.”

He straightway ordered his chariot to be prepared, and bearing with him gold bangles for mother and child, passed through Háfizganj that night and arrived at the village in the morning.

And when he returned home, he thought, sitting in his loneliness : “ A thousand times I had heard of this accursed custom of the Ját—with indifference as of a trifling matter of which I had no concern. Indignation at the iniquity sprang sudden in my heart, spontaneous, as pure of any rational thought as the impulse of the mother to cherish her child, surely then inspired directly by the Divine Spirit.”

Then for the first time since the day when he was left solitary his heart was light.

BOOK THE FIFTH

THE BANKRUPT

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RECALL TO DUTY

PRAYER, ritual and purifications continued to fill most of Premnáth's day, notwithstanding the bold excursions of his critical judgment. The two currents of his mental life were separated by a barrier, each proceeding on its own way unimpeded by the other, except during transient fits of depression when he distrusted both. But ere long, in renewed ecstasy of prayer, the painful doubts vanished and the serenity of his mind was restored. He had no desire to return to the world ; nay, he began to shrink from it as from an impurity ; as a return to trivial and sordid pursuits, in close intercourse with men, struggling to overreach one another, reckless of the injury inflicted, for a base end.

When his grandson Bálgobind, after receiving his university degree, left to take up a government appointment in a distant part of the province, the old man lost the one congenial companion with whom he could converse freely and debate the moral questions raised in their first discussion. And when soon afterwards the young man's wife and child followed him, Premnáth sank into deeper solitude. Tára Muni, his son's wife, inflated with dignity as mistress of the house, and flurried with domestic cares, worried the recluse. And her children, shy of his austerity, avoided him. He began to realise that his son Dwárkánáth was no longer at ease in his company, and their intercourse became constrained and at last merely formal.

Dwárkánáth was moreover often absent from home, sometimes for long periods, ostensibly on business matters. But as to this Premnáth made no inquiry. He desired to know nothing of the affairs of the bank ; they were no longer any active concern of his ; and he was not unconscious that information of any injudicious transactions would disturb his secluded life. He saw the clients come and go, the clerks busy with their accounts and letters ; he heard the clink of the money counted and tested ; all the old routine seemingly unchanged ; but it was part of a world he had abandoned, as remote from him now as from the meditative birds on the eaves.

Thus, as the days passed he sank deeper into solitude ; in his household a survival of a past age, a shadow passing to and fro without a link to the life within. And now with relaxed interest in his speculations, his intellect began to lose its alertness, and his thought to move automatically in a circle. The new moon appeared and waxed to full and waned to reappear anew, and the events of his life were the ceremonies of the lunar phases : one passed into another, leaving no mark of its passage upon the anchoret's mind : he lost count of the lapse of time. But throughout the town and countryside his reputation for sanctity began to spread ; and, as he passed to and from the temple by the river, simple folk sought to touch his feet and secure his blessing. To such homage, even if he were conscious of it, he remained quite indifferent.

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At length, when the circle of the year had twice revolved, a rude shock from the world without aroused him from his seclusion.

It was the afternoon of the full moon of Baisákh. The recluse had scrupulously performed the complex ceremonies of the morning, taken his midday meal, and now, in a posture of meditation sate on a strip of matting spread on the roof, shaded by the pipal-tree rustling its foliage of tender green.

He thought, in dreamy reverie : " If my beloved had been spared to me, could I have attained this consummation—to

seek nothing, to desire nothing? Did she depart to leave the way clear to eternal peace? Was her death blessed, as a sacrifice for her, and for me, as the loosening of the tie which held me to this world—sordid and empty without her? And if the beloved were restored, the glory of the world would return, and again I should cling to the world of sense? If this be true—how can I affirm that desire is dead in my heart?”

But the cry of the koel, the joyous voice of the arisen life of the year, broke in upon the idle reverie, and raising his head, he saw, standing at the entrance to the staircase, with her soft eyes fixed on him, the widow Har Sundari, mother of Bálgo-bind.

“You would speak to me?” he asked gently, after an interval. “Approach, my daughter.”

She bowed low and stood before him with hands pressed palm to palm.

“Had you waited long?” he asked.

“While one might count one hundred beads repeating the holy name.”

“My mind had wandered through strange ways to painful thoughts. But speak, dear daughter.”

“It is of my son, Bálgo-bind——”

“Ah, that dear head!” he exclaimed, interpreting the anxiety on the mother’s face. “No ill news of him, or of his child, and my beloved Indráin, on whose face I long to look again.”

“I know not what brings him; but to speak with you on urgent matters.”

“Urgent matters!” repeated Premnáth. “About which he could not write. Some serious difficulty perhaps; some evil befallen. But affecting things no longer within my scope.”

“Father,” she urged, “of this be sure: for no slight cause would he break in upon your peace.”

“His uncle is here to guide in worldly concerns.”

“My brother-in-law is absent—long absent; we know not where.”

“Bálgo-bind can learn in the office where business has called his uncle. Let him seek his uncle. But stay, if he come to

consult me on spiritual matters ;—there are many nice points I would gladly discuss with him. Much I have missed his cool reason and sharp words.”

“ Dear father,” she urged, “ so much I gathered that the matter affects the very honour and welfare of our house.”

The old man felt a shock at these ominous words, and remained silent a few moments. When he replied, it was in a rougher tone :

“ My daughter, vex me not with information which will vainly ruffle the peace of my soul. In these things I have no share, and desire none. Keep them from me.”

But she added resolutely : “ And only through your intervention can calamity be averted.”

“ Daughter, dear daughter,” he answered, “ let me hear no more of these things.” And then, in a gentler tone : “ and make it not harder for me by thy persuasive words and tender looks. Thou surely wouldst not lead me astray from the holy path by awakening desires which have sunk down even as in death.”

Har Sundari pondered in silence awhile, and then, guided by a flash of insight into his soul, she answered : “ Nay then, dear father, I would not persuade you to swerve from the path of holiness. I will tell my son as from you : that to the affairs of the world you are dead ; that you have renounced all concern for our worldly weal, abdicated all authority in favour of my brother-in-law, your son ; even as though he had performed the last obsequies of his father dead. I will tell him that when you bestowed your blessing on that Ját household, which you had cleansed of crime ; when you did this act of redemption, you closed the chapter of your acts for others’ weal, and your remaining days are devoted to the salvation of your own soul. I will tell him that after threescore years, filled with generous deeds, you should be free to seek in your own way your own salvation. This, I think, my son may understand, and rest satisfied that his grandfather follows the right way.

“ And further I will tell him, there are many nice points touching spiritual doctrine which you would gladly discuss

with him : that you have sorely missed his cool reason and sharp words. And, I will add, that even now such a delicate point of doctrine has arisen, most worthy of debate : whether, when danger threatens, the honour and welfare of the house of the anchoret, the welfare of all that which in his unregenerate days he held most dear and sacred, and only through his intervention, and not otherwise, can disaster be averted ;—whether then the anchoret should not turn for a little while from his steadfast pursuit of his own salvation, and intervene again in worldly things to avert the threatened calamity. This surely is a nice point of doctrine, and in debate thereon can there be no intrusion on holiness.

“ So I will deliver the message to my son.”

She was silent, and his gaze remained fixed on her fervent face as she stood before him with downcast eyes and hands pressed palm to palm before her bosom. And the thought broke in upon him : “ What answer would my Beloved give to such a plea as this ? ” And in his heart he heard her resolute voice : “ Act ! ”

But he said only : “ My daughter, thou hast a subtle wit to imply much through gentle words. Smooth and soft are the words, but he who listens well discerns a bitter meaning and rough to smart and rasp the recesses of the heart.

“ But, so let it be, thou soul crafty in all holiness. Deliver thy message even as thou hast shaped it. Let the youth wash and feed and rest and come to me.”

“ He has washed and changed his raiment while waiting to receive your commands. And if you permit, he will come now.”

Premnáth nodded assent, and the widow bowing touched his feet and slowly withdrew.

Then Premnáth arose and leaning on the parapet looked through the rustling pipal ; and his soul was as agitated as the leaves. In his ears rang the words as harbingers of evil : “ the honour and welfare of the house ; the welfare of all she, my Beloved, held most sacred.

“ Held most sacred,” he murmured, “ when she shared her life with thine—that most wise and gentle soul.”

And from amid the boughs the koel whistled merrily again and again, the voice of the arisen year.

Then, some unconscious association brought before him a vision of the white marble dome and the soaring columns of that most fair sepulchre raised to a lost Beloved, which looks down on the Jamna waters, when, his wife seated in her chariot, he standing beside, they had together looked upon it from the left bank of the river, and saw it glittering in purity beneath the deep blue sky. Surely, she had said, the great king enshrined her memory and his love under the choicest temple the hand of man could shape, an emblem for all time of what may be achieved by the noblest love.

Then his heart yearned again for the unattainable.

A loud creaking of the door aroused him, and he saw Bál gobind closing the entrance of the staircase to bar all intrusion from below.

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Premnáth embraced the young man warmly, and bade him be seated on a cane stool, while he himself resumed his place on the mat in a posture of meditation. Thus for a little while they sate in silence—the visitant from the world beside the recluse.

“I have missed you from the house, and not less the sweet presence of Indráin and her child,” said Premnáth, breaking the silence.

“And I,” replied his grandson, “even amid my new duties have greatly missed our discussions on doctrinal matters, which you permitted. Not a little have my thoughts been cleared by your searching tests.”

“And you would add, and confirmed in the doctrines you supported.”

“Nay, sir, hardly that,” replied the young man. “I am not yet an adherent of the new philosophy. I am but a searcher in the stage of doubting the foundations of the old. But in the life of constant action I now lead, I have scant leisure for these abstruse problems.”

“Action,” repeated Premnáth meditatively. “Action

urgent, pursuing time on the heels—and the fatal too late! Hence the disturbance of tranquillity indispensable for meditation on things spiritual. Surely our great teachers were wise who commanded for the devotee a dwelling in the desert separate from kith and kin."

"They knew, no doubt," said Bālgobind, "that those we love and cherish as ourselves, and who cling to us as their dearest, are our strongest links to the sensual world; and not until affection for these is extirpated can the sin of desire be finally cleansed from the heart."

"No doubt, no doubt. Not until affection is dead."

"But affection may survive even death," added Bālgobind. "And thus it would seem that for two classes only is complete renunciation of worldly desires possible."

"How so?"

"First for the youth who becomes a devotee before the family links are formed and before the sacred obligations of mutual service and love incurred. Of the affections and duties in the household he is ignorant; and such as he feels have been directed to the mystic being known in his ecstasies."

"True, my son," said the old man. "He can never know the yearning for the lost, and the comfort from those who are left. And the other?"

"One such as the Dásnámi monk of whom you spoke so much to me. By sudden calamity he was bereft of all that was his—wife, children, wealth. The world he had loved had vanished, and no bond to hold him remained. Yet, I judge, that had his children been preserved, he would not have deprived them of a father's love and care."

"How can you affirm this?"

"From what I learnt from you, sir. When he approached the end of his days, he desired to return where he had dwelt with wife and children, to die there and be buried in the river-bed below his old home. Not sacred Benáres, not holy Narbada, nor the holy land of Krishna, did he choose as a final resting-place—but that little hamlet by the river, unknown to fame, where he had lived as a husband and father. Hence

I infer that his gentle heart could have never endured separation from his living children in their need of the father's care."

"Yes, my son, yes," said the old man in a low tone. "His was indeed a most gentle, but not a strong spirit."

"And this too I may affirm from what you told me," continued Bál gobind. "Throughout his anchoret-life, through his long years in the south, the embers of desire were never extinguished in his heart. In vain was his long discipline: the sin of earthly lust clung to his heart to the last."

A long silence followed. Premnáth sate motionless in the posture of meditation; his grandson looked away to the rustling leaves and the little flocks of birds restless in the boughs—and from the topmost branch the koel sent forth his triumphant note.

"Shio Dás Tirthá was but a weak spirit," said Premnáth at last.

"Yes," replied Bál gobind, "but his heart had been warmed with strong love for his own, and long years and discipline could not quench its after-glow. So far then, steadfast in the way he had trod through his best years. His love had gone outwards and could not find satisfaction within his own soul. Weak, yes; but a spirit of ardent love—not of self."

Another long pause ensued before Premnáth replied:

"In his strict performance of the anchoret's rule, in the ecstasy of prayer, he found oblivion of sorrow; and from his meditations there sprang a firm hope of union with the divine spirit and satiation of his love. His aspect and words all revealed a heart at peace—untroubled each day and for the morrow."

"Then he found the comfort he sought, and his long discipline was not in vain," said Bál gobind.

"Ah, you see your error."

"At least he was unconscious of his failure to kill desire," replied Bál gobind. "He knew not then that to cling to the memory of earthly love was a fatal hindrance to achieving the end of the anchoret-rule—the extinction of desire as a condition of final absorption in the divinity."

"Perhaps so, my son, perhaps so ; but happy was that gentle monk through the dulness of his perception."

"You no doubt discussed these matters at length with the old monk ? "

"Often ; but it was to her whom we have lost that he opened his heart."

"Ah, none other could equally move to confidence and confession."

Premnáth was silent, for his utterance was choked by a rising emotion. Then after a pause, the young man asked :

"Perhaps some day you will tell me what passed between my revered grandmother and the monk ? "

"Not now, my son ; perhaps hereafter. And yet," he continued, after a pause, "one part of his debate with that dear spirit I would recall. He told how after long absence in a theological school, he had returned home, and he said solemnly, 'Then I learnt that the greatest treasure for man in this transient world is a wise and true and loving wife.' Thereupon the lost mother of our house pressed him, and asked : 'You, even as a departed spirit, now overlook your earthly life, comprehending the bliss and sorrow thereof. Tell me, if it depended on your will to pass once more through any stage of your life, would you choose to live it again, and yet again, for all eternity ? '

"And at first he evaded the question under a cloud of obscure doctrine, but she urged him to reply from his own simple heart, and he answered thus : 'My daughter, thy heart is pure, thy mind sincere ; to thee I can answer and surely, those days that followed my return, all too brief, I see them now as days of purest happiness : of good done, of no evil willed, and the light that shone on them was from my beloved wife and our children around us. I dare confess to thee, though it be a sin of desire, I would live those days again and again, even to all eternity.'

"Such was the old monk's confession, and our lost one answered : 'Father, there can be no sin in such yearnings, whatever the celibate doctors may delve out of their profound solitude,' "

He spoke the last words in a voice hardly audible, and broke off, with difficulty suppressing his emotion. The last day with her in Dwárka, and all its incidents, surged up in his memory. He signed to the young man to leave him, and when he was again alone, he arose and leant over the parapet and moved restlessly to and fro.

"This boy," he thought, "once her darling Gobinda, how strong his likeness to her—feature, demeanour, gesture, even his little tricks of speech; and in his mind, as in hers, the doctrines of our saints are reflected in many diverging rays!"

He knew well now what her counsel would have been in this emergency, when the honour of the house was at stake. And he answered now in his heart, as once before he had spoken to her: "How shall I say with a surety that thy woman's wit hath not pierced to the very root?"

Had not the widow said, she on whose tongue was truth, "Only through thy intervention can this threatened calamity be averted." If he refused to answer this call to the sordid world, how could he endure to live under the consciousness of her reproach?

He turned with sudden resolution, and with slow but unhesitating steps, descended from the roof to the hall beneath, where he had been wont to transact his business. But arrived in middle of room, standing under the chandelier, he was again checked by a mental struggle.

"If I give heed to this appeal, then I must act, and abandon my seclusion and divine things. Thus shall I confess in my action that my efforts have been in vain; that my will has been too weak to subdue desires of the flesh; that I have yielded even to the first temptation to turn from the holy way. Our people who have revered my saintly life, who have bowed to worship me as the holy devotee; all these will look on me askance as one who has abandoned holiness for prophanity: I, holding the common ways of men to be unholy—wilfully, consciously pollute my soul, which had progressed so far on the way to purification!"

"Can I boldly affirm that in choosing the life of seclusion,

I strayed from the right path ? If not, then hereafter I live burdened with a sense of sin.

“ Can I reject this appeal and leave those we loved to dishonour and calamity ? If so, can I hope to recover the calm spirit, which is the one thing needful to the holy life ?

“ One way only is there of escape : even now to abandon house and home and vanish in the wilderness. Never again to see these holy walls ; never again to hear the loved voices ; never again to recall my youth and manhood and age—to sweep all these from memory and live conscious only of desire for union with the Divine Essence.

“ Oh, my Beloved, the command is to obliterate all thought of our common past, to sweep from the shrine of memory the most holy relics ! Profanation ! Avaunt ! ”

He uttered the words aloud, and as he did so, raising his head, saw reflected in the wall mirror the figure of an old man, naked to the waist, thin almost to emaciation, the hands expanded on outstretched arms as though to thrust away an assailant ; and the brows were drawn down over angry eyes and distorted features crudely manifest on the shaven face.

For an instant he started back, not realising that his own reflection stood before him. Then the tension relaxed and he sank down on the floor silent and still.

“ Truly, truly,” he muttered, “ no saintly figure ; but at least one resolute to repel a foe ! Shall the most profound feelings of the heart yield to the reason of an over-subtle brain ? ”

The struggle was past, and never renewed.

CHAPTER XXXV

BÁLGOBIND

PREMNÁTH left no interval for further hesitation, but at once summoned his grandson.

"Grandson," he said, in a tone of brief decision, when the young man had taken his seat, "you seek my aid on a matter touching the honour and welfare of our house. What I can I will do. Let me hear what has happened."

"It concerns my uncle and his conduct of the affairs of the bank."

"So I feared. Where is he now?"

"I cannot say. I learn that he went on business to Mirzapur; thence he wrote that letters were to be addressed to him at Patna. His last letter was delivered ten days ago; since then nothing has come, though important papers were forwarded to him by the head clerk."

"Well, proceed."

"Let me then relate from the beginning how the matter came to my knowledge. You remember one Sayyid Ali Husain—son of the blind Sayyid who died some time ago?"

"Surely. A family of fanatics, who caused some trouble. One of the daughters married into the family of our Tahsildár."

"The same. Well, an old college friend of mine wrote to me from Koel reminding me of my promise to visit him, and suggested that I might take advantage of three days' holiday to do so; and he added that a lecture to a select few was to be delivered in English, which I might like to attend, especially as the lecturer originally came from my native town—and he named the Sayyid."

"Now I had read—nay, studied with much interest—the

report of the notorious address which he delivered here. I was eager to know more of the man, and decided to accept my friend's invitation.

" Well, we attended the lecture, some ten or twelve of us in all, and, after he had concluded, I remained to converse with him, when he answered my questions with patience and courtesy. At the close of the conference he drew me apart and spoke of you, sir, and I told him briefly what had befallen. He then inquired whether I knew anything of the conduct of the business under my uncle. And when I replied that I had been entirely occupied with my studies and official duties, he said : ' I beg you will excuse my intruding in your private affairs, but, apart from the fact that I am now interested in you personally, I have not forgotten that your grandfather once helped my people in a serious difficulty. I would therefore venture to remind you that a practical man in your position, as a partner in the common family estate, will not neglect to exercise some supervision over it. You should know then of a report which has reached me. I have a trusted servant, a native of your district, who brings me gossip, trivial and otherwise—but whatever he tells me, he has heard or seen. And regarding your house he reported, the old Sáhu Premnáth grown feeble, has retired, leaving his son Dwárkánáth alone to conduct the business. The old reputation of the house is quite lost ; most business goes now to the Khatri bankers of the New Market ; moreover, the villages belonging to the Sáhu are uncared for and the tenants fleeced. For this Dwárkánáth neglects his affairs, gambling, and consorting with dancing girls whom he entertains sumptuously in an establishment somewhere in the East, where he chiefly resides. The common opinion is that the old firm will quite break up. Such,' continued the Sayyid, ' is undoubtedly the report in the town and neighbourhood ; as to the facts I know nothing, but as a friend and well-wisher I advise you to ascertain what foundation, if any, there is for the rumour. Your preoccupations with science and philosophy and the grave matters we have discussed to-day, neither these nor your official duties will justify your neglecting the private affairs of your house,

upon which depend the welfare of the members of your family, to whom you are guardian.'

"I was struck dumb by this strange information so strangely brought to me, and for a while knew not what to say. Then I ventured to ask him what steps he advised me to take. He answered: 'As I said, you must test this report, and if it be true, take prompt measures to avert the threatened bankruptcy. In this your practical ability will be tested.'

"He then permitted me to depart, expressing a hope we might meet again.

"After some consideration, I started at once for Háthras, to our old correspondent, Sáhu Rám Dhan Dás. If, I thought, our business is really falling into disorder, he must have some inkling of the facts, and I shall gather his opinion without revealing the existence of any suspicion. He gave me a warm welcome, and I explained that being in the neighbourhood on a holiday I had taken the opportunity of paying my respects to him.

"He asked many questions about you, sir, which I answered. Then he asked me why I had not followed in the way of my fathers in the banking-house, and repeated the old saying, 'First rank tillage, next rank trade, and last of all, work for wage'; and when I expressed my strong distaste for business and my ambition to rise to dignity in the service of the State, he said gravely: 'Well, you will excuse my saying that as your grandfather has retired, you should devote your abilities to the old firm.' I replied: 'Oh, my uncle suffices for that, and has sons to succeed him.' He repeated my words gravely: 'You say your uncle suffices. Do you know, then, how the business has gone on under his management?' When I answered that I knew nothing as to that: the business was entirely in my uncle's hands; he remarked drily: 'I see, you leave him to administer your estate without any supervision or audit.' I excused myself, saying, I could not venture to supervise the acts of my uncle, who was in the place of a father to me, and that I was, moreover, entirely ignorant of business details. Then after a pause he said: 'Young man, your house and mine have been connected for very many years, and your

grandfather was once a close friend of mine. It would grieve me much to learn that his affairs had fallen into disorder. I would venture, therefore, to caution you, in strict confidence and in private—that I have reason to think that the signature of Premnáth Tiwári's firm is no longer regarded by the banking community as unimpeachable security.' I said, 'You alarm me; I beg you will tell me what you know.' He answered kindly but cautiously, 'You know we must be very careful how we speak of the credit of a banking-house; and you must bear in mind that what I say is addressed to you in strict confidence. But so much I know from a correspondent of mine in Calcutta, that your uncle has been speculating largely in the gold-mine shares, that these have fallen in value and that he is reported to have lost very heavily. I myself know he has been engaged in Calcutta in these share dealings—quite alien to the business of his firm; and it is highly probable he has been the victim of an astute gang of brokers there, who batten upon inexperienced and venturesome spirits. As to his love of gambling, that is well known among us. Even you must have heard of it!' I admitted that it was so, and he continued: 'Well, gambling is a greedy spirit. But in the Calcutta share market success is not likely to attend an old-fashioned country banker who pits himself against the astute speculators who live by their dealings. Thus it is, my son, I would urge you to look into the state of the firm on which the fortune of your family depends. And one thing more I learnt from my Calcutta correspondent, that your uncle, posing as a great landholder and banker of the north, has been giving very expensive—aye, extravagant—entertainments in Calcutta. And meantime, the bills that pass through my hands show that his legitimate business has greatly declined.'

"Then I begged him, as an old friend, to advise me how I should act. He answered at once: 'Go home. Tell your uncle that you have resolved to throw up your official position and join him in the administration of the business. You have an indefeasible right to do this. Unless indeed,' he added after a pause, 'you can persuade your grandfather—if he still has his wits about him, notwithstanding his craze for the life

of a devotee—(such were the Sáhu's words, sir, which I merely repeat), let him then,' he said, ' himself resume administration of the firm and put due restraint on your uncle's irregularities.'

" So much, sir, I learnt in Háthras, and I resolved without delay to report to you all exactly as I heard it."

Premnáth remained silent, slowly realising the full purport of his grandson's communication ; and it seemed that bankruptcy might be imminent, involving the ruin of his ancient house and dishonour both to his son and himself. It was some time before he felt able to command his voice sufficiently to speak with deliberation.

" Gobinda, my beloved," he said, with a tremor of emotion in his tone ; " you have acted with decision and great discretion. And that strange Śayyid—half-crazed as we thought him—he spoke practical wisdom, affirming that for each the affairs of his own house are a first duty."

He paused awhile, and then continued, the decision in his tone increasing with each word he spoke : " Rumours of our unsoundness rife in the market ; our credit depreciated, if not already lost ; possible bankruptcy no doubt freely discussed in secret conference of our merchants ; our business passing, if not already passed, into the hands of those upstart Khattris of the New Market—crafty vermin leagued with the District Treasurer, your uncle's dear friend, forsooth. Aye, aye, they are snapping their beaks like crows hopping around a dying beast ! "

He checked himself, subduing his rising anger, and then continued :

" Gambling in this new-fangled stock market ; broken away from the safe honourable ways of our house !—Vying in lavish expense with the great merchants and landowners of Bengal !—Insensate folly ! Under the spell of a greedy mistress bred in the harlots' nest of Rámgarh ! "

He paused again, muttering to himself, and then sate still in thought.

" Gobinda, my beloved," he said suddenly. " In your hands it lies. If the house is to be saved you must take over the

business. Your uncle's boy shall be trained to join you—and he, my misguided son, shall be excluded from all control."

But now Bálgobind's face fell. "Sir," he said, "you are aware that I am totally ignorant of business. I know not even the banker's script."

"You are quick to learn," replied his grandsire, "and I will be your teacher." Then he broke off for a moment, and continued with vehemence: "And so Rám Dhan Dás said I had lost my wits, becoming a crazy devotee! We will see, we will see. But the old fellow was right, when he insisted you ought to devote yourself to the business of the firm. It is clearly your duty. You see that now, Gobinda?"

But the young man answered with hesitation: "You will no doubt ascertain without delay the exact position of our affairs. When that is clear, then, sir, what is for the best I will do. But I will not conceal, that it will be a most painful sacrifice to abandon the career I have chosen."

"Surely," replied his grandsire, "even as for me to leave the holy path I have sought to tread."

"So I feel, sir," replied the young man dolefully, "a grave sacrifice for both. And yet, if it be needed to save the credit of our house and our honour among men——"

"Well said, boy. And Rám Dhan Dás shall learn I am not the old imbecile he imagines. Come, then, I will act at once. Let the accountants be summoned—both Bihari Lál and Chet Lál. And despatch a messenger to bring in the Balia land-steward and the village accountants. I must know what has been going on in our villages. Ah, I will probe the matter to the bottom before I rest."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE AUDIT

AS soon as Bál gobind had left the chamber, Tára Muni entered unannounced, and sank down before her father-in-law, touching his feet.

"Pardon me," she cried in a broken voice, "I heard loud and angry words, and my husband's name. What has happened? Where is he? Why has he left me? What sin have I committed that he has abandoned my bed?"

And burying her face in her hands, she broke into sobs.

"Hush, hush!" said Premnáth softly. "Do not weep and wail here. Get you inside."

But she answered wildly: "Tell me of my husband: what has befallen him? Something dreadful has happened to bring you forth at last from your seclusion!"

And again she began to wail.

"Go inside, daughter," he insisted. "The men from the office are coming here. I will see you hereafter. I know not where your husband is; probably in Calcutta on business. But I have no news from him. Get you inside, as I bid you."

Still sobbing, she arose slowly to comply;—but his purpose had changed, and he checked her.

"Stay a moment," he said. "Sit you down, I will speak to you first."

And seeing Bál gobind approach, he bade him wait with the clerks until called. Then turning to the agitated woman, he spoke in a gentler tone.

"Be calm, my daughter, and try to speak quietly as I do. Listen. Serious complications of business have arisen, and in the absence of your husband I must deal with them myself."

"But my husband is well and safe?"

"I have no news whatever from him, as I told you."

"To whom shall I turn for help but you—you, his father?"

"Moderate your voice, daughter, if you would have me listen. Now lift your hood that I may see you."

She looked up, showing her plump face with full trembling lips stained with tears.

"Daughter, have you been long in distress?" he asked gently.

"I dared not approach to break into your seclusion. You had warned us, and we obeyed."

"But answer my question, I beg. Then some anxiety has long oppressed you?"

"Ah, had our mother-in-law not left us, all would have been well!—The trouble began when you departed. He neglects me completely, cannot abide my presence. And I know well he has fallen into the snares of a hateful creature—some Pátur from the hills—may my curses blight her face!—And I lie despised; I, the mother of his children, to whom I have devoted my life; to them and to him—always his obedient and loving wife. To whom shall I turn for help but his father?"

"How long has this gone on?"

"I know not how long; for more than a year."

"But our Har Sundari was by, the mother of our Gobinda. You spoke to her?"

"The widow remonstrated with him, when he was last at home. But he answered lightly, bidding her not interfere between man and wife; that a wife must herself bind her husband to her bed; if she fail no one can renew the link; the attraction must proceed from her; nothing can replace this; he had exposed me to no dishonour: brought no rival into the house; and left me complete freedom of domestic sway; always treated with respect, as the mother of the children and mistress of the house. What more could he do? If I could not kindle the flame again from the ashes, it was dead for ever. Such was his ribald talk to her, and much more."

"What did Har Sundari advise?"

"The widow? She bade me have patience; care for the children; guard the house with wisdom; be gentle to my husband, and submissive in all. Then a day would come when he would return to me penitent.

"What else could I do? And what he had said was true: outwardly he has ever treated me with respect; to me as mistress of the house has been no dishonour. What else could I do? Had I attacked him with anger, pursued him with weeping, I had lost him for ever. Now I live in hope that one day he will recover from his infatuation and return to me again in love. I know not, I know not, but I hope."

"My daughter," said the old man kindly, "our dear Har Sundari counselled well. We will hope his heart may be purified and his eyes opened to his folly. When he returns I may be able to influence him. But enough now, my daughter. Do thou retire within. Hereafter I will consult with the wise mother of our Bál-gobind."

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When Tára Muni had retired into the inner apartments, Premnâth went across the quadrangle to his dressing-room. There he laid aside his necklace of beads, washed his hands, and pouring water over his head cleaned the ashen brow-mark from his forehead. He then bound on his head a neat turban of white muslin, put on a vest of the same material and over it a silken robe embroidered with gold thread, the full dress he was wont to wear when receiving clients of rank. He felt the need of a visible symbol of his return to the world; and thus restored to his former dignity he returned to the hall, where seated on the cushioned dais, he awaited the appearance of the clerks.

They soon appeared, the cashier Bihâri Lâl and the chief clerk Chet Lâl, white-bearded Kayasths both, who had grown old in his service, grave men with sharp eyes and features, and stealthy demeanour.

They bowed low before their old master, exhibiting no sign of the surprise they felt at his sudden transformation from

one they had regarded as dead to the world to the shrewd banker of old days.

"Lála Bihári Lál, and you Lála Chet Lál," he said gravely, "I greet you again as your master after many days. Be seated both, and we will confer on business. And you, Gobinda, sit here on my right."

And when they had settled down in their places with due ceremony, he continued: "Know then, that the days of my penance and seclusion are finished, and I come to resume my duties in the house of my fathers."

"Bábu Sáhib," said the head cashier, "we grieved when our old master forsook us and rejoice at his return. Your son, whom you set over us, we served as we served our old master."

And the chief clerk re-echoed the words.

"Briefly then," said Premnáth, "I must know without delay the state of our affairs."

The two clerks exchanged glances and the cashier answered with hesitation: "Sir, we obeyed your son; in some matters he attended to our remonstrances——"

"Well?"

"Our affairs are not as when you left them. But of your son and his administration we hesitate to speak."

Then the chief clerk intervened: "Master, the receipts have dwindled, the outgoings increased——"

"Our cash balance in the treasury urgently needs to be augmented," added the cashier.

"The young master," continued the chief clerk, "had promised to remit from Calcutta, where he was to realise shares. Nothing has come; and bills have fallen due."

"You mean then, briefly," said Premnáth sharply, "that unless funds are speedily found bankruptcy threatens us."

The two clerks shook their heads dolefully, and the cashier said deprecatingly: "The young master was sanguine of success in his dealing with speculative shares. I do not profess to understand the new ways."

"Aye, aye," exclaimed Premnáth: "I see, old friend, you

would palliate his errors of judgment. But you admit, our credit has waned almost to extinction and that of our Khatri rivals has steadily waxed."

"Master," said the chief clerk, "since your hand was withdrawn fortune has set steadily against us. But with your auspicious return all may yet be well."

"Then we must act without delay," said Premnâth sharply. "You say that my son left his address at Patna? Write then to Háfizganj by to-night's post, to despatch a telegram ordering him to return here at once." This to Bál gobind. Then turning to the clerks: "Close the bank. Make it a holiday. Then bring hither all your accounts. I will ascertain exactly our assets and liabilities. No dark corner shall be left unlighted."

All through the night Premnâth sate with the two clerks auditing the accounts. At dawn he had completed the work and drawn out a balance sheet. It showed a deficit of nearly two lakhs of rupees, and that bills to a large amount falling due within a few days could not be met.

He dismissed the weary clerks, and summoned his grandson, who had passed a sleepless night on his couch.

"I have completed the audit," he said, when the young man had taken his seat amidst the pile of great volumes bound in red cloth. "And the result is briefly this: within the next eight days we must find a sum of not less than twenty-five thousand rupees, or the firm will be declared bankrupt."

"Then Rám Dhan's anticipations are more than realised," said Bál gobind dolefully.

His grandfather continued: "Large sums were raised and drawn by your uncle, apparently for speculations in the share market, and of these there is no account, neither bonds nor credits. He may possibly hold shares which can be realised—or he may have lavished the money in gambling or mad extravagance. And from what Rám Dhan told you, if he has shares they may now be worthless. I find he raised money by mortgages on our Balia estate—deeds are in the strong-box,

but the money has never been placed to credit. We have no estate left on which to secure a loan.

"Thus it stands, my boy; bankruptcy and dishonour is imminent."

"Cannot we raise money on our ancient credit?" asked Bál gobind feebly.

"Our credit has vanished—as you learnt abroad."

"Let me apply to Rám Dhan," urged the young man. "He will stand by us, and at his instance the Seths of Mathura will help."

The old man shook his head. "Do you not see that the last remnant of our stability lies with me—an old man very near his term? If I die there is none to succeed and accept the liabilities. The only solid asset left us is the jewellery of our women—and all thrown into the melting-pot would be insufficient."

Bál gobind sat silent, at length realising the full extent of the calamity. He hung down his head, helpless.

Then his grandfather continued with deliberation: "There is one way only of escape. I will call a meeting of our creditors, lay before them the exact state of our affairs and allow them to examine the books for themselves. I will say: 'The present assets, if realised at the best, will suffice to pay only a few anas in the rupee, if you now insist in pressing for liquidation. But give me time, and I will undertake to re-establish our business and repay every debt with the interest accruing.' It is possible, I will even say probable, that they will consent—but they will do so only on two conditions: First, that your uncle shall be entirely excluded from the business, and secondly, that you, Gobinda, consent to be bound with me, accepting full liability, and undertaking to carry on the firm until every debt has been liquidated in the manner to be hereafter arranged. If they feel that you are to be trusted, they will, I think, agree—and it will be for you to impress them with your capacity, solidity, and good faith."

Bál gobind's heart shrank at the dreary prospect before him. Throughout his university career he had been inspired by visions of achieving honour and dignity in the service of the

State ; in this he had been encouraged first by his grandmother, and then by his mother. And he loathed a commercial life. He thought swiftly : " If bankruptcy comes upon the firm, then I am free ; for the loss of income I care little, provided my official career is unhindered. If my grandfather were dead, I would throw the estate into the hands of the creditors to make what they could of it. Must I be sacrificed, and this old man devote his few remaining years to the odious task of repaying debts incurred by a miserable spendthrift ? Evil accumulated on evil ! "

He could not consent ; but he could not refuse his grand-sire's earnest wish, and remained silent.

" You hesitate ? " said the old man.

" Grandfather," replied Bál gobind, with a strong effort to speak rationally, " as I said, the sacrifice for me is very great : to renounce a career for which I have worked for years, and enter on another for which I have the strongest distaste. The penalty of my uncle's folly falls on me—to sacrifice my warmest hopes and submit to an odious bondage ! "

The old man's brow grew dark and his countenance stern, but his grandson continued : " Have patience with me, dear grandfather. I would ask you to realise first of all, what this demand on me amounts to. There is another possible course open to us : let my uncle meet the creditors ; let him take the consequences of his actions, and let the creditors who trusted such a man get what they can out of the wreck. For our family some pittance will be left, and for them I will care ; and you, sir, you will be able to follow undisturbed the life you have chosen, the life of a devotee, contemplation of divine things, in lieu of becoming once more immersed in the sordid business of reinstating a fallen firm."

" Is that then your answer ? " asked Premnāth sternly.

" Nay, not my final answer," replied the young man. " It is a plea for your consideration only. But one boon I would ask : before I give my decision, permit me to consult my mother ? I never have taken any serious step without her counsel, and I would not do so in this most grave of all."

After a few moments' silence, the old man replied in a harsh voice : " So let it be. Now leave me."

Premnáth remained seated motionless : his lips compressed and his forehead wrinkled. He had expected to find in his grandson a zealous ally, ready to sacrifice his own predilections and interests for the honour of his house. He was, it seemed, quite ready to call upon his grandfather to abandon his chosen life of seclusion, but shrank back at once, when his own comfortable future was to be disturbed ; rather than offer this affectionate tribute, he would allow their honourable house to be ruined and debased ! It seemed that his foreign training had not only disintegrated his belief in their ancient creed, but alienated his heart from the venerable ways of his forefathers. And he, emotional old fool, had fancied that the holy spirit of her he had lost inspired this selfish youth !

He arose sadly, changed his garments, and went to the bathing ghát and temple. He performed the rites and repeated the prayers, but his thoughts ceased not to revolve on the perils which threatened the house from the iniquity of his son and the cold selfishness of his grandson.

CHAPTER XXXVII

MOTHER AND SON

BÁLGOBIND sate at his mother's feet in the veranda of her chamber.

"Mother," he said, "I have always come to you in my troubles, and I come now." He leant against her cot, and she laid her hand upon his head, caressing it gently—almost timidly. He continued: "I have to decide in a matter so grave that it will affect all my future."

"My son," she said, "we will each hear the other's words and weigh them, and then it will be for you to act as seems to you most right."

"Know then, mother, first, that my grandfather has relinquished his life of devotion to resume the administration of the bank, of our commercial affairs, and of all our estate."

"And this in consequence of the information which you hurried home to bring. Strange!"

"Yes. Through the night he has audited the accounts; has found the firm to be bankrupt: we have no assets to meet the debts my uncle has recklessly incurred."

"But, my son," she exclaimed, "the dishonour—it will break his heart—our poor father!"

"Better had he remained in undisturbed seclusion, heedless of temporal affairs!"

"But, my son, it was you who drew him forth!"

"True;—perhaps rashly. I saw not the consequences; at least, all was doubtful until he had examined the books. But let us continue. There is one way, and one only by which bankruptcy may be avoided."

"Ah, thank God!" she exclaimed. "There is then hope; he may be saved from this dishonour!"

"Aye; by a costly sacrifice, both for him and me: he must abandon his life of devotion and I my chosen career."

"Explain, my son."

"If he and I together undertake the management of our affairs, and jointly bind ourselves to repay the debts within a term of years, then the creditors will consent to defer their claims."

"Then it must be so."

"Yes, mother, if I abandon the career upon which I have entered and for which I have so long prepared."

"Your assistance then is indispensable?"

"So my grandfather affirms, and he is best able to judge."

"Then wherein is the obstacle?"

"The obstacle?" repeated her son. "This, the grave sacrifice I must make."

"Let me understand, my son," she said gently. "I am slow to understand these business matters. Does your grandfather say, that unless you join him in the firm to recover the lost credit of the house—bankruptcy cannot be avoided?"

"Such is his decided opinion, mother."

"Well, my son, since that is so, the course is surely clear."

"But you do not understand, mother!" he exclaimed, with some impatience.

"Surely," she continued, "you rejoice, and I rejoice with you, that in your early manhood an opportunity is offered to accomplish so great a work, to save the honour of our house, restore its credit, and preserve from disaster all we value most. The ordinary course of our daily task is a fixed routine, which may be accomplished by one as well as by another; and we look back on days as of scanty glory, and no pre-eminence in piety or devotion;—on a good quiet easy past such as millions of common folk have known 'twixt birth and death. But you, my son, have been chosen for a great achievement: to preserve the honour of an ancient house, to obliterate all memory of the folly and wickedness of one of our own people—one so near to us, and alas! even in the place of a father to you. And this great task will demand your best abilities; it will test your self-control;—you will be as the holy anchorite

whose senses, thought, and hopes cling to the world, but are steadfastly subdued by his pure devotion. Thus you too, my son, are summoned to a long and harsh discipline to achieve a noble end ;—as a youth summoned to the divine life abjures the entrancing visions of his warm young heart and joins the brotherhood of holy men. My son, my son, no calamity is this for us, for you and for me. I, your mother, rejoice that you have been chosen ; and you too will rejoice with me in your noble renunciation.”

She clasped his head and pressed him to her side.

He could not speak. The specious reasons which had crowded into his mind to justify his refusal to accept the task were suddenly transformed into lame excuses and sordid pleas suggested by a selfish heart ; they were no grounds of reason founded in the nature of things, but the pretexts of a mean soul wriggling away from a painful duty to follow unhindered a selfish ambition.

“Thank God,” he exclaimed at length. “Thank God, that I have such a mother to counsel me. I will endure and encompass the end.”

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FATHER AND SON

ON the fourth day, soon after the bank opened, Dwárkánáth arrived. As he alighted from his palankeen he saw his father standing under the arcade, which overlooks the bazaar, in conversation with the headmen of the Balia villages ; standing as he had been wont to stand at this hour in the days now seemingly so remote in the past, before he departed on the pilgrimage to Dwárka. He was dressed in the white garments and closely bound muslin turban, and his forehead was no longer stained by the brow-mark of the ascetic.

Dwárkánáth interpreted the change at once, as indicating that his father had resumed the administration of the firm. A vague anxiety fell upon him, but when his father turned towards him, he advanced with a composed countenance. He bowed submissively below the steps, and humbly took the hand which his father held out to draw him towards him. He stood silent while the old man gave final orders to the peasants and dismissed them to their villages.

"Your return now is most welcome, my son," said Prem-náth in a kindly voice. "You look weary and haggard, unwashed and famished from a long journey. Get you in, and when you are rested and refreshed let me know, and then we will discuss the business which awaits your decision—and mine."

"I started at once from Patna, on receiving your summons, and have travelled here without a break."

"You did well, my son. But now those within will care for you, now as always."

Dwárkánáth passed into the house, leaving his father in the

outer office. In the courtyard his eyes fell upon Bálgobind seated in the veranda, poring over papers and books of accounts.

"Ah, nephew," said Dwárkánáth cheerfully, as the young man stood up and bowed respectfully. "What is this I see? Our English bachelor of arts, and the magistrate of a district to be—immersed in our *mahájani* accounts! What, our rulers have surely not found thee wanting, and relegated thee back to the ancestral shop?"

The young man shook his head gravely, without any attempt to reciprocate his uncle's amiable smile.

"Nay, sir," he replied, "the need of our private affairs; nothing else has compelled me to abandon my chosen career."

"Then you too will be a banker, eh?" returned his uncle lightly. "Well, there is scope enough for your talent in our business, and I doubt not but your decorative university training will open out for you new vistas of enterprise in our humdrum routine. Still, it had been well if you had stuck to the career on which you had entered: a youth who chops and changes gets a character of instability. Well, well, we will talk of this hereafter. I must wash and get food before I can attend to business."

Leaving his nephew disgusted at his levity, he turned to enter the inner court where he was met by his wife.

"My lord, my husband!" she exclaimed, bowing to touch his feet.

"Ah, wife," he said, complacently patting her head. "Here I am after a long journey, grimy and famished. For two days I have eaten nothing but parched grain and dried fruit. So get me some food quickly—the best you can serve without delay, and meantime I will wash and change these soiled garments."

The two younger children then ran up, the little girl and her brother crying: "Father has come home again." He lifted them affectionately right and left, and they clung round his neck, with cries of joy at his return.

"And where are the two big brothers?" he asked, caressing

the children. "Ah, hard at work at school—good studious boys both. They will grow up to be real clever fellows—like the big Bál gobind yonder. But now get down, children. When I have washed and dined, you shall tell me all you have done in these many days."

He set them down gently and hurried away. But he thought: "How haggard and withered is that old wife! It makes the eyes sore to look at her."

When the dinner was ready and his wife sate down near, as she had been wont in former days, he begged her to go away: he had been so long used to dine alone he did not like to be looked at. And she withdrew in silence into a dark corner to stanch her tears.

But when he had dined and settled comfortably on the pillows of the outer hall, she appeared again bearing freshly-prepared *pán*, saying: "This is mixed as you used always to like it."

He took the silver box, rewarding her with an easy nod and smile: "Ah, one thing you were most skilful in mixing. You learnt it from the mother. Now leave me, good wife, I will rest until my father is ready to discuss business. Yes, you have your hands full with the children and household affairs. Go along."

Left alone, he closed his eyes and endeavoured in vain to stifle his anxiety as to the cause which had drawn his father from his seclusion into the current of business, and produced this ominous reserve and gravity in the demeanour of his nephew. He was aroused by his father's voice giving directions that no one was to be admitted until he announced the doors were no longer closed; and by his entry through the door from the public office.

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Dwárkánáth arose and waited in silence for his father to speak.

"We will sit here," he said. "We shall be out of earshot of the women."

He took his place on the central cushion and signed to his son to sit on his right.

"I was sorry to hear that Bálgobind had left government service," remarked Dwárkánáth, nervously breaking the silence. "He should have consulted me before taking such a step."

But his father paid no heed to the remark. The tender expression with which he had greeted his son's arrival had now vanished; and he looked at his son grimly under bent brows.

"Where did my message reach you?" he asked abruptly.

"At Baksár," replied Dwárkánáth. "My agent at Patna sent on the telegram. I started at once, knowing that the matter must be urgent."

"It was urgent," said his father. "So urgent that I have broken my vows of devotion to attend to it."

"Excuse me, father, but I do not understand how mere worldly affairs penetrated your sacred seclusion."

"How? What matters how?" exclaimed his father impatiently. "As a thunderbolt pierces the roof." Then checking his sudden irritation, he added: "And yet the bolt disturbs not the meditation of the true anchorite: it slays him or leaves him unmoved. But to the point of our business: I have gone through the accounts of the firm, checked and audited them—and the final result is, that bankruptcy is inevitable."

He paused, with eyes fixed on his son, who shifted nervously and said: "Surely not so bad as that."

The old man continued: "You dealt heavily in gold-mine shares, and other speculations. Do you hold any of value to set against the deficit?"

"Ah, the prospect of the operation was splendid. But I held too long. The market fell, and those I still have are reduced to mere nominal value—nay by this time, they must be waste-paper."

"And the other shares?"

"I sold them."

"And the proceeds?"

"I invested in the gold mines—which turned out complete failures; in fact, swindles."

"And the balance?"

"Oh, I had heavy expenses in Calcutta."

"You gave some great entertainments?"

"Why, yes. I had received much hospitality, which I naturally wished to return with liberality. The entertainments were a great success. People said they vied with the fêtes of the old Tagore."

"But, my son," exclaimed Premnáth, "are you crazy, reckless, or mad?"

"Oh, not at all, father," answered Dwárkánáth with an affectation of ease. "I just tell you what happened. If the gold shares had not suddenly depreciated—and I was confident they were rising—my operation would have been an enormous success. I held just too long, you see, and a panic suddenly set in. So I drew bills on our firm, mortgaged the villages and cleared off the Calcutta debts. You agree, sir, that in this I was right?"

"You found life congenial in Calcutta?"

"Very much so," replied his son quite frankly. "In fact it suited my tastes exactly. Those landholders and merchants of Bengal know how to make the best of their ample means. Up here we do things but poorly: narrow means, narrow ways, narrow views—dull plodding lives. There you have music too, and song and poesy, and free discussion and free living; I mean those have who are admitted to the select circle."

Premnáth looked at his son with amazement: he seemed bereft of moral sense.

"Well, leave that for the present," he said. "The upshot is, you bring back nothing as an asset to the firm. My judgment then is confirmed: we are bankrupt."

"Surely not reduced to that extremity," urged Dwárkánáth. "Bihári Lál wrote that we were pressed, but I replied that the sale of my shares would meet all claims with a handsome balance."

"Have you ever been through the books?"

"I looked at them when I was at home last——"

"Looked at them!" exclaimed his father, in a tone of angry contempt. But he controlled the expression of his indignation. "You may take it from me as final. I do not err in these matters. There is the balance sheet."

He threw a paper to his son, who looked at it blankly, without any attempt to master its contents.

"That being so," continued his father sternly, "I ask you, as the person responsible, what you mean to do?"

Dwárkánáth shifted his position uneasily, looked at the balance-sheet, pushed back his starched cap.

"The matter is very complicated," he said. "On the spur of the moment, I can suggest nothing definite. Some of the chief obligations are in the hands of the Khatris, who will, of course, be eager to close down a rival house——"

"Of which they have already annexed the chief business," interpolated his father bitterly.

"I will talk over the position with Bihári Lál; the old fellow is complete master of every detail."

"I have already mastered the details and spoken at length with the old man."

"Well, sir, if old Bihári Lál, who has managed the business for forty years, can suggest nothing——"

But his father now interrupted him with a grave stern voice: "My son, is it possible that you do not realise the nature of this dreadful result? I beg you, give me your attention. You know, or did know well, that for three generations our firm has maintained unbroken dignity and honour in the world of commerce; aye, and not less with the rulers of this country for the time being. Its integrity has been our life's blood, and with the loss of it we perish—all of us; without it we are mere outcasts of the world in which we move. Rather than witness this calamity, I would have seen our villages wasted, our household gutted and burnt by the Mahrata raiders: at least our honour would have been preserved, and we should have arisen from the flames undefiled. But now our race is revealed as rotten and corrupt by the conduct of one of ourselves—by you, my son. Your recklessness, your mad ex-

travagance, your utter indifference to all that has been sacred in our house, has brought us to this pass. Our calamity is no result of ill-fortune, but solely the poisoned fruit of your iniquity. Through you, we—our women and children, yours and your brother's—are swept down into a morass of poverty and dishonour, to slink about the world shamefast with hanging heads. I thank God now, that your mother did not live to witness this shame of her son ! ”

The old man covered his face with his hands and his body was shaken by convulsive sobs.

Dwárkánáth sate silent with set features ; every word had burnt his soul like a brand on the flesh. But his father recovered quickly, and continued in a quieter tone :

“ Now, my son, I beg you, consider this. I, an old man retired from the world to devote my remaining days to holy meditation, I am dragged forth to make at least one last attempt to rescue our house from the calamity you have brought upon us ;—I am doomed to look on my once beloved son as a dishonest monster whom none will trust again ; as one to be cast out from the honoured house which he has disgraced ;—to be cut off like a gangrened limb.”

The old man sank bank exhausted by the inward struggle and effort to express all he felt.

And now Dwárkánáth sank forward overcome, and wept. It was long before he recovered his self-control and rose before his father, who had sate impassive, unmoving.

“ Father,” he cried, “ all you say is true. I know it. I have shown myself unfit. I am unfit. My thoughts, my desires, have always been elsewhere ;—expatiating with vain hopes in vague regions. I have cast my heart before me, and followed it, oblivious of the daily task. That is my very nature. I have long known it : even before my mother left us ; and I read in her looks that she read my heart. Such I am ; such must I live ! ”

He paused some time, and then speaking in a low tone : “ Father, I confess—and herein you may know my soul—even now I cannot repent for those days of freedom, days and nights with my heart's delight : her songs, her sweet voice,

her endless caress—and all the merry comrades who shared those days. I cannot sit down and groan in penitence, that I have lived in folly and sinned. No, it was a joy granted to me lavishly. Aye, and the greedy delight of speculating in the great share market, with its daily rise and fall ; the eager hopes and sudden fears—a life of constant excitement, worth a score of years passed in the old routine. I confess it, father, I confess. But for the calamity which has overtaken the house, I rue it bitterly. But for the happy days and nights, I cannot sit and weep for these whate'er betide.

“ And listen, father, let my confession be complete. In my heart of hearts I feel, were the occasion to come again—again I would repeat that life : it is my very element, and without it, life is not for me.

“ Now, father, I have spoken all, freely. You know me, what I am.”

His father looked on him, moved to a new pity : as was the son's nature, so he had acted : thus was he made, thus must he act. And after prolonged silence he spoke :

“ My son, I understand. Even as the honeysucker seeks the lotus, so dost thou. But now hear my command. For thee there is but one remedy, for thee and thy disease. And thus too may a little honour be saved. Thou shalt abandon the world : thou shalt cover thy body with ashes and don the yellow garb. Thou shalt leave thy house and kin and all that is thine, and go forth to live under the strict rule of the anchoret, to dwell in the wastes, where only can thy spirit be purified. Thus only may be extirpated the perverse spirit rooted within thy being.

“ Thy wife and children shall be my care, and Bál gobind's with me. But henceforth let thy way be with the hermits of the waste apart from that world in which thou canst not live in honour.

“ Ponder on this, and if the spirit move thee, as I pray it may, in the right way, do thou depart silently in the night—and hereafter be to us as one deceased. Let me see thee no more.”

Then Premnáth embraced his son, pressing him long to his

bosom, and his chest heaved while tears flowed from his son upon his shoulder.

Dwárkánáth withdrew softly into the dim shrine where the holy images of the house were kept. He remained there meditating and praying until the night closed in, when he left the house secretly, having spoken to none therein.

BOOK THE SIXTH

THE HERMIT

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE LOST SON

FIVE years had passed ; for Bábu Premnáth Tiwári and his grandson, Bál gobind, years of ceaseless devotion to business and of the strictest economy in expenditure. And the task which they had undertaken was complete : the debts had been liquidated, the mortgages on their villages released and the capital and credit of the bank restored.

Premnáth sate alone in the hall after his midday meal, in his hand the fair balance-sheet for the financial year just closed : the duty for which he had abandoned his religious seclusion was finished, and he was at liberty to withdraw once more from the world of secular interests.

In quiet meditation he recalled the changes during these five strenuous years.

His grandson, notwithstanding the bitter disappointment at being compelled to relinquish the official career he had chosen for another which he strongly disliked, had speedily mastered his new work, and within a year assumed a leading place in the firm and introduced a fresh spirit of enterprise. At last amidst new interests he ceased to regret the sacrifice he had made ; and soon found a wider scope for his ambition. He joined the Local Boards, was appointed Honorary Magistrate, and acquired a reputation in the administration of the district. Already he pictured a future in which he was raised to the rank of nobility and selected as a member of the Vice-

Regal Council. Sanguine British officials pointed to him as a choice example of the new University education.

The young man's wife, Indráin of the joyful spirit, and her children, now four in number, had once more brought light and laughter into the old house. In their young lives the old happy days seemed renewed.

Of the lost Dwárkánáth's family, the two eldest boys had gone to the English College at Benáres, and his daughter to her husband's house. But the latter's place was taken by the young wife of the eldest boy, a girl of sixteen now with an infant at her breast, who afforded constant anxiety to Tára Muni, the deserted wife.

Thus Premnáth reviewing, after the Feast of the Dasahra, the last five years felt a glow of quiet satisfaction : his house had been preserved from the threatened ruin and raised to a position of increased wealth and reputation ; and his home was filled with young and vigorous life. What more could his Beloved have wished for those whose welfare was the first and last thought of her daily life ?

He recalled the reluctance with which he had answered the call to abandon his religious seclusion ; the mental struggle it had cost him and the influences which had finally determined his choice. Had he done rightly in turning aside from the path of salvation of his soul ? Had he refused to make the sacrifice demanded, his ancient house would have fallen in ruin with dishonour ; his grandsons would be now seeking pittance as clerks and servitors, hangers-on of the courts and offices ; the girls, lacking marriage portions, unmated, the women huddled together half-starved ! So completely had the five years of strenuous and fruitful work changed his mental attitude that his days of devotion now bore the aspect of a passing disease of the spirit, aggravated by the shattering of his attachments to life through severance from his beloved wife.

And now that he was once more free to choose his way of life, he made his choice without hesitation. Through years of intimate association he had become infected with his grandson's energy. The path of salvation (if path there were) was

the path of action steadfastly directed in righteousness to a worthy end ; through the exercise of the god-given faculties of life ; far apart from that of ascetic sages who would benumb the soul in prayer and penance, and intoxicate the starved spirit with visions of phantoms moving in dream spaces. His sphere of life was clear : he would live in active work to the end, and administer his wealth for the welfare of his house and his town ; and replenish the store as expended.

He thought of the saintly widow Har Sundari. She lived now as the guardian spirit of the house. Never could she have abandoned the ties of love and duty to seek in austere seclusion the salvation of her soul ! What creed was that which rated her conduct below that of the self-centred anchoret ? Through a life such as hers was the soul ennobled for a higher sphere—if for any.

He had passed out of the cloud of illusion to live henceforth as his Beloved would have willed—she a pure spirit endowed with inborn wisdom more profound than the sages of old who with their subtleties had perplexed the world !

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Then his thoughts turned to his banished son Dwárkánáth. During the past five years he had from time to time received tidings of the prodigal from the religious mendicants who came periodically for alms. His son had joined a company of Sanyásis, and dwelt at Hardwár, Prág and other holy places, and last at the shrine of Badrináth of the Snows. But many months had now passed without further news of him.

And the father mused : Surely there was some grace in my son that he so frankly acknowledged that he was unable, and even unwilling, to control his proclivity to idle pleasures, to gambling, and riotous living and the lusts of the flesh. He obeyed without demur my command to submit himself to the austere discipline of the anchorets as the only means of purifying his spirit and controlling his miserable lusts. He had confessed his sin, and accepted the full penalty.

“ And now after five years of penance his heart may be changed, and he not unworthy of the mother who nurtured

him. She would surely have desired to recall him, and her wish would have prevailed."

Premnáth dwelt long on this, and his desire for his son became very strong.

When night fell and the lamps had been lighted in the hall, he called his grandson, and laid before him his thoughts regarding Dwárkánáth.

"You, Gobinda," he added, "have been to me as a son, now for many years; nevertheless, if my son Dwárka could be with me when I die, it would be well."

Then Bálgobind answered meditatively: "If *after* your decease my uncle should reappear and lay claim to his rightful share in the estate, much disorder and strife might, I fear, arise."

"That is true," replied the old man, surprised at the remark.

"But if he returned now," continued Bálgobind, "and you found him still a victim of his infatuations, your influence would suffice to prevent such a disaster; while if he prove to be sane, you can quietly provide for his future position in security. In either case he will submit to you, but to none other after you."

"Ah, that is well put, Gobinda," exclaimed Premnáth, relieved. "Your practical mind furnishes grounds of reason, and I may without scruple yield to my desire to recall my son. His nature was gentle and his errors devoid of iniquity. Weak, impulsive, not vicious."

"I doubt it not," answered Bálgobind. "And through five years' discipline he may have acquired strength to follow the right. But," added Bálgobind with a sterner ring in his tone, "but, if his ways are as of old, he cannot be associated in the conduct of our business. What was his, he destroyed. What we now hold is mine and my children's, and his children's, not his."

"That is so," replied Premnáth. "Your uncle was impulsive and heedless, but he will not revolt against my will."

"Have you any information about him?" asked Bálgobind.

"None recent, but I will set the roving *sádhus* to search."

"Last night," said Bál gobind, "I heard his wife moaning, and my mother checking her unseemly expressions of grief. Then Indráin told me that Tára Muni Devi at the fair of the Rám Lila yonder recognised her husband in company with two other Sanyásis. It might be well to question her on this."

"I will do so without delay," said Premnáth eagerly, and went into the inner apartments.

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Tára Muni was alone in the little chapel praying before the lighted lamps and her brass image of the holy child Krishna. She stood up when she became aware of the grave figure of her father-in-law on the threshold, covered her head and bowed.

"Let me not interrupt your prayers," he said.

"I have finished," she answered, "and I think you seek me."

He bade her sit down, he had a matter of importance to discuss with her. Then the light falling upon her showed a stout woman of forty years, with hair streaked with grey, puffy features and large watery eyes.

"It is of my son, your husband Dwárkánáth."

"Ahi, ahi!" she moaned. "My prayers avail nothing. I am abandoned for ever."

"Be calm, my daughter," he said gently. "Perhaps even now your prayers are bearing fruit. The days of his penance are complete: I would recall him to his home."

She shook her head mournfully. "He never will come back again."

"Why do you say that, and yet pray for his return?"

"I shall ever beseech the Lord Krishna to relent; though in vain. Listen. I saw my husband. Yonder in the grove where the deeds of the Lord Ráma were being acted by the players."

"Well, what then?"

" Behind the great figure of the Dæmon Rávan, there, under the mango tree where is the *jogis'* seat ; there, with two other Sanyásis, naked, covered with ashes and crowned with knotted hair. Ah, but I knew him well."

" Well, what then ? "

" We walked to and fro in front of him, I with Indráin. But he sate motionless with his eyes fixed on the ground."

" Did Indráin recognise him ? "

" How should she ? ' Some old, old Sanyási,' she said. But I knew him well. And listen. I sat down in front of them and drew back my hood, and prayed to the holy man to give me his blessing and aid me to recover my husband who had gone from me. And I said, ' Teach me a prayer and a spell to lure him back, and ever I will cherish him as a bridegroom. Know,' I said pitifully, ' I am Tára Muni of the great banker's house in the Old Market, once the happy mother of four children—his children—Gangua and Teja and Lakshman and the dear Silyám Sundari, ah, the girl was loved by her father who is now lost to us ! I and they and all the house would cry with joy and fall at the father's feet, if he came. I would be his slave, if he would return to cherish our youngest boy, our little Lakshmana, whom his father loved most.' "

" Well, all this you said to the Sanyási, and what reply did he give ? "

" None, alas, not a word, but he sate like a figure carved in stone. Then I wept and began to repeat my prayer, but the chief of the three, who sate apart—an old, old man, toothless and thin as a dried pipal leaf, he spoke severely, saying : ' Daughter, my disciple is sunk too deep in meditation to emerge at the trivial wailing of a woman.' But I was not overawed and answered sharply, ' This disciple of yours was once my husband ; and I claim him to be restored to his children—four there are, my lord.' Then he answered : ' This my disciple is a dedicated spirit, no husband of thine, dedicated to the Great God, to Máhádeo. Get thee gone, and take back this fee thou hast cast down, for no answer will be vouchsafed to thy prayer.' Then I fell down before my lord weeping and cried : ' Thy children call thee, and claim a

father's blessing and care. See, yonder in the crowd are two, Lakshmana and thy beloved little daughter Silyám Sundari. Wait, I pray. I will bring them now, and their prayers shall prevail when mine are in vain.'

"Then I hurried away swiftly to seek the children in the crowd around the railings of the play, but much time passed in the search, and when I ran back with them, holding their hands—the seat of the three Sanyásis was vacant—a heap of smouldering ashes only was left.

"Ahi, ahi! my lord, the father of my dear ones! he sate unmoved as a figure of stone while I wept and prayed at his feet.

"Ahi, ahi! The children dragged me back to look at the play of Ráma and Sita and Hanumán, and they laughed and were amazed and delighted, while I sate silent and weeping under my hood."

"You are convinced the Sanyási was your husband?" asked Premnáth, after a pause.

"How should I not know my dear lord with whom I dwelt for twenty years?" she answered sharply.

"Did you not inquire where the Sanyásis had gone?"

"None knew: they left while the people watched the attack of Hanumán on the Dæmon Rávan. How should any note the coming and going of three naked Sádhus? But, yes, a herdsman there was, who heard Indráin questioning; he had brought his wife and children from the forest to show them the great play of Rám Chandra. He told us that one of the Sanyásis had dwelt on the border of the forest under the great banyan tree in the Monkey Grove; not the old toothless master, nor the lean disciple with the scar on his cheek, but the third, the youngest, my husband. Nothing more could we learn."

"The Monkey Grove?" said Premnáth. "There are many of that name."

"On the edge of the forest, he said. Nothing more did I learn."

"But the forest border runs many hundred miles, east and west."

"But," replied Tára Muni, with an unusual gleam of intelligence, "the herdsman brought down his wife and children, so it cannot be far."

"True, my daughter. Dwárka is living and well. He shall be found, and if he reverences his father still, he shall return to the world and his home."

CHAPTER XL

THE FOREST HERMIT

ON the second day following Premnáth set forth at sunrise in search of his son.

He had learnt from a borax merchant, who travelled to and fro to the Bhotia market at the foot of the hills, that about twenty miles distant, near the Ahir graziers' huts at Amsot, were some ancient mango trees known as the Monkey Grove ; and that when the forest grazing lands were open at the close of the rains a hermit often abode there, supported by the herdsmen's charity. If that hermit was one of the San-yásis seen by Tára Muni, he was probably on his way back to the forest from some pilgrimage during the rains. The information was meagre, but Premnáth, eager to start his quest, would not linger for more ; and he was restless for movement and change.

It was now the fair month of Kártik. In the deep blue vault of the sky scattered clouds floated motionless like great balls of white cotton ; the breeze from the north-west lightly swayed the yellowing ears of the rice in shimmering waves ; and over the fields white cranes flew restlessly in flocks, and in inseparable pairs, the great sáras uttering that plaintive call which awakens the pangs latent in the bereaved heart.

Over the narrow causeway Premnáth's chariot rolled smoothly, drawn by the stout oxen jingling their silver bells, and before him, a hundred miles to the north, was unveiled the mighty serenity of the Range of Snows.

At noon he reached the huts and cattle-pens of the Ahir graziers. The headman was basking in the sun after his midday meal, but, recognising his visitor, he advanced to receive him with the reverence due to his rank.

Premnáth learnt from him that the place known as the Monkey Grove was only half a mile distant, and that the anchoret had returned to his hermitage a few days before ; he had come round to their huts the previous afternoon to gather scraps left from their midday meal. He was a man apparently between forty and fifty years of age, a *jogi* with knotted hair, who never spoke. As to his name, origin, and residence during the rains, the headman knew nothing.

Then the headman's son came up, a lad of about eighteen, tall, straight of limb, lithe and alert as a panther. Leaning easily on his iron-bound staff, with unembarrassed gaze he scrutinised the renowned Banker from Ronáhi, and, learning the object of his visit, eagerly offered to conduct him to the hermit. It would be best, he said, to start at once or the holy man might wander forth on his afternoon round.

Premnáth hastily refreshed himself with a draught of water and some parched grain and sweetmeats, and set forward on foot guided by the young man.

They passed through the fence to a strip of ground where the forest trees had been cleared and the grass partially burnt. Beyond this was a thicket of karila-thorn running down in places to the fence. A wide path beaten down by the hoofs of the cattle led them to an extensive mound, the remains of an ancient town, of which no record was preserved, overgrown and lost in the great submontane forest. Here was a clump of decayed mango trees, and beyond stretched a wide glade of finer grass, in the midst of which a great banyan tree covered with its numerous offsets a considerable space, cleared of grass and brushwood.

The lad, who carrying his club over his shoulders had hitherto preceded Premnáth, from time to time looking round with a pleasant smile to make sure that the pace was not too quick for the old man, now stopped, and, holding up his hand as a signal for silence, waited for him to come abreast. He pointed through the numerous root-stems to a little shed made of jungle grass which stood against the main trunk. "That is where the holy man dwells," he whispered. "You go on."

Premnáth advanced without speaking. In front of the shed the ground had been beaten smooth and plastered with clay. A fire of brushwood was smouldering in a hollow, and inside the shed was spread the skin of a spotted deer over a strip of matting, upon which lay a water gourd and a satchel of plaited reeds, but the hermit was not there.

"He is gone," said Premnáth, in a tone of disappointment.

"Not long though," replied the boy. "See, the fire has been lately fed. And see, he has left his gourd and begging wallet. Perhaps he has gone down to the spring. Shall I call, as we do when we bring him food? If he is in hearing he will come soon to take it, for the jackals or monkeys are lurking about ready to steal. Look, that knowing old monkey on yonder tree is watching us. He will pounce down as soon as our backs are turned."

Premnáth assented, and the lad raised a shrill cry, "Arê ! Arê, *jogiji* ! Come and take the food we bring !"

The startled wood pigeons, green parrots, and ever-chattering mainas whirled noisily around, and the grey old monkey on the fork of the mango stump barked angrily and shifted his seat ; but no *jogi* appeared or replied.

"I know he was here before noon," said the boy. "I heard him calling the jackals."

"Calling the jackals."

"Yes," answered the boy. "They come at his call to eat the scraps he throws to them. They will feed from his hand."

"Shout again and again," ordered Premnáth.

But no answer came back except from the fluttering birds and the barking monkeys.

"Perhaps," suggested Premnáth, "seeing me, a stranger, he is hiding in the thicket."

"Aye, that might be," replied the boy. "He might think you wanted something from him. Who knows? None but we herdsmen come to him, and he never speaks."

"Not when he goes round begging?"

"Not a word ; he might be dumb," replied the boy positively. "But you go back and hide yonder behind the plum bushes and leave me to call him."

But the stratagem was of no avail, and Premnáth returned to the boy at the shed.

"Well," said the boy, "of this I am sure, he will return before his fire goes out. He keeps it burning at night to scare the tigers and panthers while he sleeps under his thatch."

"Do the tigers prowl round here?" asked Premnáth.

The boy laughed scornfully. "When don't they? Why, only yesterday evening, when we drove the cattle in, one of our cows was killed yonder, not a musket-shot from here. If you like I will show you the place. We drove her off with brands, and gun-shots, and the skinners flayed the cow, and this morning they bore off the remains of the carcass. I shouldn't wonder if she were lurking down there in the thick grass by the stream, of a mind to sup off the flesh. Ah, but those skinners were before her."

"You think the hermit will return before nightfall?" asked Premnáth.

"I am quite sure of it. There is no moon till midnight and even a *jogi* can't get about here in the dark."

"Then I will wait. See, it is already passed the third watch," and Premnáth pointed to the sun, more than half was down to the west.

"Very good," said the boy. "But lest by chance the sight of you should scare him, we will hide behind the bushes and watch unseen."

So they sate side by side where the afternoon sun warmed them, and there was shelter from the cold draught of air from the mountains.

"Do you hear that?" whispered the boy, after a long silence. "The cries of the startled peafowl, and the growling and barking of the monkeys on the trees. There is a tiger or leopard moving somewhere near. It is early yet, or I should guess the tigress who killed here yesterday had come for her supper. Stay, I will climb the mango stump to look down on the spot where the cow was killed."

"Do you think I could get up the tree?" asked Premnáth, moved partly by desire to see the beast, partly by a certain nervousness at being left alone close to a prowling tiger.

"Oh, you could climb up with my help," answered the lad. "But you townfolk get panic-struck at the sight of a tiger free. You might fall off from fright."

"No fear of that," replied Premnáth. "Nay, I should feel safer there than here."

"Come then," said the boy in a whisper. "Follow me and make no noise as you step."

He led the way across a narrow open space to the edge of the thicket of the venomous karila and prickly plum, where stood a mango stump almost hidden behind a leafy shishm tree. The boy leant against the trunk and Premnáth mounting his back climbed to the fork, the boy springing up after him as nimbly as a cat. Through the shishm foliage they could see amidst the bushes a circle of grass trampled down and stained.

"That is where the carcase lay," whispered the boy. "Keep your eye on that, and if it was our tigress she will surely show her stripes."

The angry barking of the monkeys grew louder and nearer, and they leapt from bough to bough. Then the bushes on the further side of the trampled circle moved, and a tiger's head stealthily emerged. The beast glared round, yawned, thrust out his tongue, and drew back into the thicket.

"She will follow the track of the carcase dragged away by the skinners," whispered the boy. "If she does you will hear our dogs barking."

He was right. In a few minutes the pack began to bay, shouts of men followed, and a gun was fired.

"That was my father's gun," said the boy.

"He shot at the tiger?" asked Premnáth.

"Not he," replied the boy. "He only fired to scare the beast. Our master, Rája Shionáth Singh of Biláspur, won't have his tigers shot."

"But if the tiger is turned back, he will be prowling about here."

"That is very likely," replied the boy. "Anyway she won't seize us, unless indeed she meets us accidentally, when

she might strike and make off. No, she only kills deer and pigs and cattle, and keeps clear of men. But yonder in the cane-brakes at the foot of the hills there is one tiger—he limps with a lame hind foot—who has a bad taste for man's flesh. He lies in wait for the pilgrims to Bádrináth and has killed a score or two of them."

"Why is he not shot?" asked Premnáth.

"Oh, they have tried many times. But he is cunning as a devil. A company of Gurkhas came down last year to hunt him, but they never got a shot. He lies in the dense cane-brake."

"Then," said Premnáth, "if your neighbour the tigress is harmless, let us get down. My limbs are getting stiff, the evening is approaching, and I would visit the hermit's shed again."

"I will beat the bushes to let the tigress know we are here," said the boy. "She will be sure to keep clear of us."

He leapt down, picked up his staff, rattled the boughs noisily and chanted at the top of his voice: "Get you gone, you hungry tigress! Get you gone. There's no supper here, no supper here."

Premnáth descended from the tree with the boy's help and they returned to the bush to watch the path to the hermit's shed.

"What a horrible place to dwell!" thought Premnáth, recalling the grim head and neck he had seen. This was the chosen retreat of his unhappy son!

They had hardly settled down when there came down a cattle-track two men, black-skinned and bare-headed, bearing hung over a pole a couple of cow-hides still raw and bleeding.

"That old fellow in front is the headman of the skimmers," said the boy. "The ugly fellow behind is Chunni his son."

"Oh, Chaudhri, come hither," he called. "Tell me, what has become of our *jogi*?"

But the Chaudhri, a thick-set old man with grey hair and

moustache and chin bristling with grey stubble, replied by another question: "What happened? I heard a shot and shouts from the cattle sheds."

"The tigress," answered the boy. "She killed the cow which you and the Kanjars stripped and carried off."

"She is moving early in the day," said the old man doubtfully.

"I reckon she's not far off now," returned the boy.

"Perhaps," said the Chaudhri, "lurking in the thickets. Well, a hungry belly drives afield early. Come, my son, we will get on to the huts. And you two had better come back with us."

"No fear from her," answered the lad. "Anyway, she's too fine a taste to choose a skinner for supper."

"I'll not trust her; she's vexed and baffled of her supper," returned the old man. "There will be spite in her angry heart."

"Well," said the boy, laughing, "you take the back end of the pole, and put your son in front. She will take the hindermost and your son will be safe."

But the old man ignored the boy's banter, and urged again: "You come back with us, Lalua. And who is this town gentleman?"

"He comes to consult our holy man," answered the boy. "No doubt he wants some spell or charm. Have you seen the *jogi* about?"

"He was at his seat this morning," replied the Chaudhri.

Here the monkeys on the trees near the thorn-bushes on the left began to chatter angrily, looking down as they moved among the boughs.

"The beast is lurking yonder," said the Chaudhri. "She will smell our raw hides. Come, my son, hurry on."

Father and son moved off, following the track well to the right of the signalling monkeys, and shouting loudly to scare the tigress. The boy joyfully added his strident calls, and the chorus of the forest joined, peafowl and parrots and mainas and monkeys and a howling jackal.

The boy turned merrily to Premnâth. "So let her majesty

the tigress take warning, there are valiant skinners about !— Will you return, sir ? ”

“ The day still serves,” replied Premnáth. “ We can wait a little longer. The *jogi* might return.”

“ If you wish,” replied the boy, and added, with a laugh : “ If the tigress, as the Chaudhri fears, be bent on mischief, his plump son will serve as a bait.”

They stood on the mound looking after the two skinners, who maintaining a loud chant were trotting quickly along the track to the herdsmen’s huts. Suddenly a tawny form arose from the edge of the thicket, there was a fierce growl, yells of terror, and men and tiger disappeared behind the bushes.

“ The tigress ! ” exclaimed the boy, and seizing his club he dashed forward without a moment’s hesitation, calling : “ Bear up ! bear up ! I am coming.”

Premnáth stood a moment stricken with amazement, then instinctively followed stumbling over the rough ground, and shouting he knew not what ! But at that instant a strange figure bounded to his side, a naked *jogi* smeared from head to foot with grey ash, his matted hair knotted above his head.

“ Stay, old man ; stay, father ! ” he cried, seizing Premnáth by the shoulder. “ Stand here, and shout for help. I am the man to cope with the beast—the limping devil I know.”

And leaving Premnáth he ran forward with long strides, waving his iron tongs, his only weapon, and disappeared in the track between the bushes. Premnáth stood still for a moment and then followed as best he could, calling for help.

Where the track skirted the thorn-bushes he came upon the raw hides, and the skinner Chaudhri beating the bushes with his pole and shouting wildly. The Ahír boy, crouched on his knees, was peering between the thorn-stems into the thicket whence came the growl of the tiger.

“ I see the beast,” cried the boy. “ She holds him by the shoulder, her paw across his chest. Stay, I will strike her.”

The lad seized a block of old masonry in both his hands, and advancing close to the thicket hurled it on to the tiger.

A loud roar was the answer, and the boy, who had again crouched down, cried :

"She is dragging him deeper into the thicket!"

"My son, my son!" cried the old skinner, beating down the thorn-bushes to make a way to pursue.

Meantime the *jogi* had skirted the thicket towards the cattle-sheds, seeking a track through the thorns. A herdsman bearing a spear ran up at the same time, and the headman with his gun was coming through the fence. But the *jogi* waited not; he snatched the spear from the herdsman, and, shouting, sprang into the thicket through a narrow way between the thorns.

"He is mad!" cried the lad Lalua, but he followed the *jogi*, bearing his club ready to strike.

At that moment the tiger emerged in front of the *jogi*, dragging the body over the narrow opening. She dropped her prey and sprang at once towards her new adversary. But the *jogi* sank down on his knee with the spear at the charge, and drove the sharp point into the tiger's throat, ere she reached to strike him down and crush his arm between her teeth. The blade had severed the jugular vein and gullet, and she fell on her victim, shedding a stream of blood and foam, gasping and crunching, while the dauntless boy beat her over the eyes with his iron-bound club, bounding backwards and forwards to avoid the deadly claws. And lying over the mangled *jogi*, the great beast breathed her last.

"Dead! dead!" shouted the boy, thrusting his staff into the gaping maw. "Killed by the *jogi*'s spear!"

Premnáth now arrived to find the *jogi* covered with gore standing astride over the stricken beast.

"A good stroke at last, father," cried the *jogi*, and then sank down fainting on the dead beast.

CHAPTER XLI

THE LIMPING TIGER

DWĀRKĀNĀTH lay on a cot in the headman's hut, and beside him his father watched. His arm from wrist to elbow had been crushed in the tiger's jaws and his back torn by the stroke of the giant paw. The headman's wife, homely surgeon of the graziers, had washed and dressed the wounds with soothing leaves, and bandaged them not unskilfully. Then having administered a hot decoction of herbs and ginger, she wrapped him in warm blankets, and ordered him to be left undisturbed. He sank into a heavy slumber, muttering and groaning.

The hut was dimly lighted by a couple of wicks burning in saucers of clarified butter, and their flames flickered constantly in the strong night wind from the mountains, which penetrated with biting edge through the many crevices.

Towards midnight Dwārkānāth awoke and tried to sit up.

"Lie still, my son," said his father, pressing him gently down and readjusting the blankets. "Lie still, lest the bleeding start anew."

"Who are you? Where am I?" asked the wounded man.

"In the headman's hut, and I your father at your side."

He lay still, looking in his father's face, and slowly recovered consciousness.

"Ah yes, I remember now. I killed an old friend, the limping tiger of the cane-brakes. Aye, he had seized the old Skinner's son. What of him?"

"His shoulder is crushed, and he is torn by the karila thorns. But they think he may recover."

"There is venom in the scratch of the karila thorn as in the tiger's claw."

"Lie still, my son," urged his father.

He lay silent again, with his eyes fixed on his father's face.

"What of the tiger?" he asked.

"Your spear transfixes his throat, and he died as he mauled you. Alas, all for the sake of that unclean skinner!"

"All are equal to the Sanyási," answered Dwárkánáth.

"If I give my life, what matters? But I grieve for my old friend the limping tiger."

"I pray you, my son, lie still and try to sleep."

After a brief silence, he spoke again: "I cannot rest, father. My brain is clear now, but not for long: soon fever and delirium, and then the quiet of death. Aye, there is venom in the tiger's claw, poison of putrid blood and filth, deadly."

"The old wife washed every wound with a decoction of bitter leaves."

"Who washed them?"

"The headman's wife."

"Ah, she. A good soul. Many a fresh cake she set aside for my wallet, and I blessed her. But what matters!"

'I hear the call of the tolling bell,
I am ready with baggage packed.'

A smile lit up his face as he repeated the Persian distich.

"A good omen, my son," replied his father, returning the smile. "How often during the last seven years have I repeated those words of the Poet of Shiráz, and, behold, I am still here preserved to aid my son."

The wounded man shook his head, and his father continued: "Lift up your heart, my son. I have summoned the great doctor from Háfizganj, and at dawn the palankin will come to bear you home."

"Ah, father, you would save your son!—But my hour is come, I cannot wait——"

Then after a pause, he spoke again in a quiet resolute tone: "Listen, father—I must speak now. Soon my thoughts will whirl like a swarm of forest bees, each with a sting; and mix curses with my groans. Listen, I beg, and grant me what I wish."

"Speak then, my son."

"At the Temple of Chándi Devi on the forest hill, my guide and master tarries to-night, and with him to serve is my brother in prayer. Let a messenger call them to my side. They will come without delay, and bury me in the way of our brotherhood."

"But the track through the forest is impassable at night," said Premnáth.

"After midnight the moon will rise. Let one of the herdsmen start when the moon stands above the trees. I would have my master, the *guru*, by me when I die."

"Ere he can get here we shall leave for your home in Ronáhi," answered his father.

"I pray you, dear father, give heed to this my last request—I have no home. I would be borne to my shed yonder under the great fig-tree, and there my master and my brother in prayer will watch over me until my spirit flits."

"Nay, nay, my son," again urged Premnáth pitifully. "I came to bring you home, that you may become one of us again as your mother would have wished. Our wise Har Sundari, aided by your wife, shall nurse you back to life."

"My wife!" he exclaimed, with sudden bitterness. "Listen! I saw her; down there in the Rám Lila grove; she wept and whined at my feet; and I shuddered and fled."

Then his father, fearing to irritate him, ceased to remonstrate.

"What message then would you have delivered to your master?" he asked quietly.

"Let him be told what has befallen me, and that I lie awaiting him and my brother, and they will come."

"I will speak to the headman."

"Nay, call him here," urged Dwárkánáth. "What I ask he will do; and you will give a fit reward."

And the headman aroused from his sleep came and stood beside the bed.

"Moti Padhán," said the wounded man, "that boy of yours, Lalua, has in his breast a lion's heart. He sprang forward as

though but a prowling jackal stood at bay. Let him be called no more Lalua, but Sher Singh."

"Your blessing will be on the boy," replied the headman, and he stood with hands palm to palm, bowing his head. "But, *jogiji*, he is reckless and knows not fear. But I pray you lie still, or you will inflame your wounds. Thus my wife commands, and she knows best."

"A wise woman and good, the Padhání," replied Dwárkánáth. "And strong of heart. From her full breast young Sher Singh sucked tiger's milk."

"But listen to my bidding, Moti Padhán. Your son shall bear a message to my master and brother in prayer, who rest this night in the temple on Chándi Devi hill. He shall start at moonrise and reach them at break of day. And, listen, my father here shall give him as a reward the best pair of plough bullocks to be had in all Hánsi."

"*Jogiji*," replied the headman, hesitating, "I beg you let the lad rest till dawn, and he shall ride there on the Bhutia pony."

"Moti Padhán," returned Dwárkánáth. "The boy is fearless. His merry song will scare the herd of elephants from the track. Know that at dawn my master will depart for Rikhi-Kes. I must speak with my master, ere my head whirls and I pass away. Bid the lad come to me, and let him choose to go or stay."

"I am here," cried the lad, coming forward, and standing with crossed palms at the foot of the bed. "What you wish, I will do! Speak only, and I obey."

"You hear, Moti Padhán," said Dwárkánáth. "His heart leaps eagerly at the thought of an enterprise. Aye, as I said, the gallant boy sucked tiger's milk from his mother's breast. You cannot hold his spirit in the leash."

"Let me go, father," said the boy. "None know the path as I do, none will follow it so swiftly. The blessing of this holy man shelters those who serve him—he who slew the limping tiger with a herdsman's spear. I shall for ever rue it if I go not."

"Then," said the headman, "if thy mother permits, thou shalt go."

Then the boy laughed : " Never would she hold me back from service to this holy man. Speak, then, *jogiji*, and I obey. But not to gain a yoke of bullocks, for your service only I would go."

Then Dwárkánáth gave him the message to deliver, and the headman and his son left to sleep until the rising of the moon.

.

Dárkánáth lay still, enduring in silence the aching of his mangled arm and the smarting wounds in his back, and his father, watching, motionless, saw his features twitching with pain.

" I cannot rest," said Dwárkánáth, at length breaking the silence. " While I speak the pain is lulled, and I have much to say. Come near me, father."

He lay on his unwounded side, and Premnáth, crouched on the mat, leant his head on the pillow by his son's face.

" Listen, father," he spoke in a low quiet tone. " I was seated yonder in my shed, and saw you with the boy, as you came out from the thicket to the foot of the mound. I knew you at once, and said in my heart : ' This old man would draw me back to life ; better if he find me not.' And I slipped away stealthily to depart where I might never be found. But desire to look again on one I had loved checked me, and I paused. You stood lingering before my empty seat, and in your face and demeanour and the tone of your distant voice, I read the signs of bitter disappointment. I thought, ' This old man is very lonely, for he has never ceased to yearn for the companion of his life, my revered mother. Now he desires to hold her abandoned son close by him to the end.' I lingered still watching, and suddenly that night arose in my memory when together we listened to the minstrel, and to you I opened all my heart, my wayward heart. You remember, father ? "

Premnáth laid his hand gently on his son's hot face.

" I crouched motionless under the bush, longing to run forward and fall at your feet. But you slowly turned back on the path to the cattle-sheds, and vanished behind the first

clump of bushes, whence the boy peeped round, watching, I guessed, for my return. It was then I heard the cries warning the forest of a tiger afoot, and you with the boy mounted the mango stump where the cow was killed yesterday. So I shifted away to the east under the bushes and drew nearer. It was then I saw the fresh print of a tiger's paw. It was not that of the tigress who had killed the cow, but the tread of the tiger with the lame hind leg. I know the track well—three treads heavy and one light with a missing toe—that of the limping beast who chiefly ranges the cane-brakes yonder under the low hills, where the pilgrims' path enters the gorge. He has killed many of those who pass to and from holy Bádrináth. Then I feared he was stalking you and the boy, and drew nearer to warn you away. But the old skinner and his son came by ; then a growl, a cry, and the shout and rush of the boy, you following.

"Then a devil entered my heart. Surely it was for a Sanyási, to let the tiger sate his hunger upon the flesh that gives him life. Yonder in the Pátli Dún thrice he has passed me ; once he drank from the stream where I too crouched to drink, and the dusky fire of his yellow eyes shone on me as he passed without a growl, limping on his way ; and on his foot I saw the livid scar of a hunter's bullet. He could spring no more to seize the deer, and fairly made a prey of man.

"But I, the Sanyási, slew the beast, for a devil breathed passion into my heart, when I saw the gallant lad spring to rescue that plump young skinner—a dainty feast for that mangled tiger's maw !"

Dwárkánáth paused in his feverish speech, with his eyes fixed on his father's face.

"My son," said Premnáth, "you did well : your nature better than the creed you have professed."

"My master will have much to say on that theme," replied Dwárkánáth in a quieter tone. "You shall discourse with him at length, and maybe he will persuade you to renounce the world at last, and follow the path of holiness."

Premnáth shook his head with a sad smile, replying : "I have passed out through the Slough of Illusions, and stand

now with feet set firm on the solid earth. But will you not lie still and try to sleep? "

"Nay, let us rather talk : it numbs the pain, and I cannot rest."

"Then, tell me, my son ; your long penance has surely purified your heart ; your penalty has not been inadequate to your sin. Why then will you not act as I bid you now, and resume your old place in our home ? I, your father, drove you forth ; now I bid you to return."

Dwárkánáth paused long, combating his emotion, and when he spoke his voice trembled : "Purified, you say, father ; desire burnt to ashes in the fire of renunciation ! " He stopped and shook his head in negation, and then continued : "Do you recall the words I spoke when we parted ? I said : 'I cannot sink down and weep in repentance for those days and nights of happiness. I know this surely, and my heart beats at the thought—were the opportunity offered again, I would live that life once more : therein only is satiation : without it life is not.' "

He spoke with swift words, and his voice became louder under a gust of excitement. And the sound reaching the headman's wife, she came in, bearing a steaming bowl.

"*Jogiji*," she said gently, but with firm tone, "if you speak thus you will bring on fever and inflammation. I bid you lie still."

"Good Padhání," he replied, "in talking thus I deaden the pain."

"You will take this soothing draught, and then resolve to lie still, and sleep will creep over you."

"Well, mother," he answered, "to satisfy you I will try. Every hand is pure to the Sanyási, and the hand of Sher Singh's mother surely bears a blessing. And if I wake no more, what matters ?

'My baggage is packed and the bell
Tolls for me to depart.' "

He drank the decoction of poppy-heads, and lay still while she adjusted the blankets close about him.

"Perhaps," he said, smiling at her, "I could dream of happy times." And he closed his eyes.

Then Premnáth at the sign of the woman lay down on a cot, wrapped in his quilt, and ere long he heard the heavy regular breath of the sleeper and the muttered words of dreams.

CHAPTER XLII

THE RENUNCIATION

THE sun arose above the forest ; the herdsmen drove the cattle to the pastures, leaving at the hut only the women, and two old men who all day long basked in the sunshine, dozing and musing of the days of their youth and manhood, their loves and contests, their sorrows and joys, all mellowed alike through the vista of years. Through the open door of the hut the sunshine fell upon Premnáth and the bed where his son still slept. When at length he began to move and opened dazed eyes, the watchful Padháni compelled him to drink hot milk thickened with baked meal, and he began slowly to realise his position. His first question was for news of the master.

"At dawn I sent the chariot up the cart-track to meet them," said Premnáth. "They will come as swiftly as the oxen can trot."

Then Dwárkánáth raising his head to listen : "Surely, I hear the jingle of our silver bells."

He had hardly spoken when the youth Lalua, surnamed Sher Singh, ran up to Premnáth.

"I touch your feet, my lord," he said. "I have done the bidding of the holy man ; and his master and brother in prayer are approaching."

"Brave boy," said Premnáth. "You shall choose the best yoke of bullocks in Hariána, and I shall still be in your debt."

"If I have served that holy man, I am satisfied," answered the youth proudly. "And now, mother, let me have food quickly, for I am famished."

The jingling of silver bells, the rattle of wheels in the rut and the tramp of the heavy draught oxen sounded, and the

chariot swung round from the back to the door bearing the master and his disciple.

The former was a gaunt old man with severe countenance and calm eyes, wearing a necklace of many strands of threaded *rudraka* berries and a tight girdle of cord. His companion, a naked Sanyási of about the same age as Dwárkánáth, helped his master to alight, and then stood back awaiting orders.

"Where is my disciple who summoned me?" he asked of Premnáth, who with reverential salutation advanced to receive him.

"He lies within sorely hurt, as you have doubtless learnt from the lad," replied Premnáth. "He is my beloved son, and I beg you will permit him to return with me to his home, where he may be nursed and saved."

"Bábúji," replied the master courteously, "I am his father in spirit; I will weigh well what he urges."

"Guruji," returned Premnáth, "do you know his history?"

"What he told me of his past is no doubt true," replied the master.

"For five years he has done penance for his sin, and may now return purified to his home."

"Nay, sir," replied the master. "What you term penance for sin, has been a constant striving for holiness. But I will confer with him, and learn his heart's most hidden desires."

Then Premnáth led him to the bedside, and the disciple following sate on the threshold, silent and motionless.

"Lie still, my son," said the master gently, as Dwárkánáth attempted to rise to salute him with due reverence. "Lie still. I know all that has befallen you, and your deed of blood."

He laid his hand on the wounded man's head, gently stroked his forehead, and then sate down on the mat close beside him, while Premnáth remained standing at the foot of the bed.

"Master," said Dwárkánáth, "this is Premnáth Tiwári, my father in the flesh. He cherished me as a son most dear

to him and to my mother. Grandsons there are many in our house, my sons and my brother's sons—but I the only son of this old man now living."

The master signed to him to continue.

"Some years ago he retired from worldly things to a life of study and prayer and ritual, and gave to me unfettered control over all our affairs—the business of a great banking-house, with branches in all the chief marts of Hind. Withdrawn in holy seclusion, he neither asked nor knew how I fulfilled my trust.

"Now my heart was set wholly on the joys of life, without them existence was void of worth : I pursued the way I chose, insatiable. Through lavish expenditure, feverish gambling, and heedlessness of our business, I wasted the estate, and lost all means to pursue the only life I cared to live.

"Then my father abandoned his life of holiness and sought to restore the wreck and save the honour of an ancient house. And when he called me before him, I confessed without shame, saying, I could feel in my heart no real regret for the days passed as I had chosen to pass them, and if the means provided I would choose to live thus again.

"He listened with patience, without anger, but said : ' In one way only may thy heart be cleansed : thou shalt live in the waste as an anchorite under the strict rule : thus only, in no other way whatsoever, shall thy wayward heart be tamed.'

"I acquiesced, and departed forthwith. And since then, my master, I have lived under your rule, and you best know how strict it has been and how I have complied.

"But now this old man calls me unto him and to my life in the world of illusions. He would bear me away even now to be made sound once more by the skill of the surgeon who saved his own, my father's life. And even now the bearers and litter await. The moment for decision has come. What does my master say ? "

Then the master, without pause, answered : " Bethink thee awhile, and calmly, and speak without haste. In the long still hours of your meditation, what thoughts break most

through the current of your prayers, surging up from the depths ? ”

“ Ah, my master, you probe direct to the secret sore !—They well up ever, beyond all control of my will ! A longing, burning, intense fills my heart, as the memories rise ;—for that fairest of women from the hamlet perched above the mountain stream, yonder, beyond the peaked hill which I see daily from my seat ;—for her song, for her dance, for her close embrace, and all the endless merry chatter of her babbling tongue. For her, the peerless one ;—for the gay company, the wit and jibes and ribaldry ; for the free debates on all things under the sun, nothing too holy to be probed to the roots or broken down to its elements ; aye, and for the gaming-table with its excitement that never cloyes.

“ Ah, my master, all this has surged up uncontrollable—a past regretted as lost, but repented never ! Though I grieve for the pain of my father, whom I have always loved and revered.”

Then the master turning to Premnâth said : “ Bábúji, you have heard. If your son go back to the world, he will return to his sin and perish in a sensual sea. His instinct leads him aright : he must live in restraint or bring his soul to perdition.”

But Premnâth answered firmly : “ Honoured master, he sits through day and night burnt by desire for forbidden joys. His soul is impure. Desire moulds the soul : as he longs so shall his soul be born again into the foul estate for which he yearns. The curse of a foul life clings inseparable from his soul.

“ Then I pray you, master, release him to return to his home. At last through satiety he shall awake to the error of his ways, and crave for a purer life. What he needs to enable him to live again as his heart desires, that I will amply provide ; and through freedom he shall reach the goal.”

Then Dwárkánáth spake : “ Father, you offer me what I have longed to possess : means to live the life I love ;—not in our little Ronáhi, but in the great cities where men suck the joys of life as the bee the lotus flower. And yet—father, not

long can you remain to rule our house, and when the day of your departure comes and I succeed to rule, the old spirit will possess me again, and I shall waste in riot all you have toiled to hoard, and the old house will crumble to dust."

Then the master took up the word: "Bábúji, when the flame of desire burns down to the socket and flickers and dies, there is no place for the control which brings salvation. Through discipline over encroaching desire shall a man be saved, not otherwise; and he who subdues the strongest passions is the greatest in our realm.

"If then this man go with you and live, he goes surely to perdition. But if he abide with us, whether he live, or die now, inasmuch as by his last act of will he has rejected the lure to life and to all he loves—even through his final act of abnegation, he shall attain to the eternal rest.

"I have spoken. My son, my disciple, my long-suffering beloved, what wilt thou do? Thou art free to choose—to go or stay."

"Ah, master, my beloved master," answered Dwárkánáth fervently, "I have chosen. Take me to yourself once more! Bear me away, even now, to my seat yonder below the great fig-tree. Tend me there as a brother wounded in no unholy fray. If I die, bury me beside the brook below, the brook we know as of Ganga Rám, whence I pass to the eternal rest for which my spirit yearns."

Then the master speaking in grave soft tones: "This man abandoned the world, inasmuch as all he valued in life seemed beyond his reach. In that there was no grace. But through years of discipline he strove steadfastly to quench the flame of desire. It scorched his heart ceaselessly, but he yielded not by any act to assuage the pang. He was constant in striving to subdue the ravening beast that gnawed his liver.

"And now at last, when the way lies open before him to return to all those joys for which his spirit craves, he holds back steadfast on the seat of renunciation: he rejects the lures of the world and chooses the hardest path of purity to the end.

"The fruit of his long years of discipline is gathered: he

has seen the vision of the perfect life, and through this vision he is saved.

"Come, thou his brother in prayer," he continued, turning imperiously to his disciple. "We will bear him to his cell. There he shall lie in peace and holiness, according to his wish, and the issue of life and death as the Great God wills!"

Then Premnáth kneeling over his son: "Speak, my son. As you choose, so shall it be."

And Dwárkánáth answered with firm distinct voice: "I will go with my spiritual father and master. Let him bear me away to my seat, a holy place where in peace I will give up the ghost—or if the Great God wills, live the holy life to the end."

They lifted him into the litter and bore him to his cell under the great fig-tree in the forest grove amid the ruins of the long-forgotten town.

But ere the sun stood at noon symptoms of lockjaw appeared; high fever followed; his mind wandered and articulation was obstructed. At nightfall he died.

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